THE ROMANCES OF

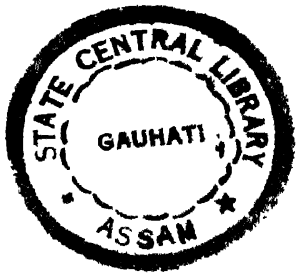
ALEXANDRE DUMAS

Handy Library Edition

The D'Artagnan Romances

VICOMTE DE BRAGELONNE

VOLUME THREE


STATE CENTRAL LIBRARY
GAUHATI
ASSAM



The First Quarrel.

THE ROMANCES OF ALEXANDRE DUMAS

VICOMTE DE BRAGELONNE

VOLUME THREE

BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

53130 A

Copyright, 1888, 1893,
BY LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY

Printers
S. J. PARKHILL & CO., BOSTON, U.S.A.

CONTENTS.

Chapter		Page
I.	Showing what neither the Naiad nor the Dryad had anticipated	1
II.	The New General of the Jesuits	12
III.	The Storm	25
IV.	The Shower of Rain	35
V.	Toby	50
VI.	Madame's Four Chances	61
VII.	The Lottery	70
VIII.	Malaga	80
IX.	A Letter from M de Baisemeaux	96
X.	In which the Reader will be delighted to find that Porthos has lost Nothing of his Strength	102
XI.	The Rat and the Cheese	124
XII.	Planchet's Country-House	133
XIII.	Showing what could be seen from Planchet's House	140
XIV.	How Porthos, Trûchen, and Planchet parted with one another on Friendly Terms, thanks to D'Artagnan	147
XV.	The Presentation of Porthos	153
XVI.	Explanations	158

Chapter		Page
XVII.	Madame and De Guiche	168
XVIII.	Montalais and Malicorne	178
XIX.	How De Wardes was received at Court	188
XX.	The Combat	202
XXI.	The King's Supper	215
XXII.	After Supper	222
XXIII.	How D'Artagnan discharged the Mission with which the King had intrusted him	228
XXIV.	The Encounter	237
XXV.	The Physician	243
XXVI.	Wherein D'Artagnan perceives that it was he who was Mistaken, and Manicamp who was Right	249
XXVII.	Showing the Advantage of having Two Strings to One's Bow	256
XXVIII.	Malicorne the Keeper of the Records of the Kingdom of France	270
XXIX.	The Journey	276
XXX.	Triumfeminate	285
XXXI.	The First Quarrel	293
XXXII.	Despair	305
XXXIII.	The Flight	312
XXXIV.	Showing how Louis, on his Side, had passed the Time from Ten to half-past Twelve at Night	320
XXXV.	The Ambassadors	327
XXXVI.	Chaillot	337
XXXVII.	Madame	348
XXXVIII.	Mademoiselle de la Vallière's Pocket-Handkerchief	357
XXXIX.	Which treats of Gardeners, of Ladders, and Maids of Honor	364

Chapter		Page
XL.	Which treats of Carpentry Operations, and furnishes Details upon the Mode of constructing Staircases	373
XLI.	The Ride by Torchlight	384
XLII.	The Apparition	396
XLIII.	The Portrait	407
XLIV.	Hampton Court	415
XLV.	The Courier from Madame	431
XLVI.	De Saint-Aignan follows Malicorne's Advice	444
XLVII.	Two Old Friends	451
XLVIII.	Wherein may be seen that a Bargain which cannot be made with one Person can be carried out with another	469
XLIX.	The Skin of the Bear	482
L.	An Interview with the Queen-Mother	490
LI.	Two Friends	502
LII.	How Jean de la Fontaine wrote his First Tale	511
LIII.	La Fontaine as a Negotiator	517
LIV.	Madame de Bellière's Plate and Diamonds	526
LV.	M. de Mazarin's Receipt	531
LVI.	M. Colbert's Rough Draught	541
LVII.	In which the Author thinks it is now Time to return to the Vicomte de Bragelonne	553
LVIII.	Bragelonne continues his Inquiries	561
LIX.	Two Jealousies	569
LX.	A Domiciliary Visit	576
LXI.	Porthos's Plan of Action	585
LXII.	The Change of Residence, the Trap-Door, and the Portrait	595

Chapter		Page
LXIII.	Rival Politics	610
LXIV.	Rival Lovers	617
LXV.	King and Nobility	627
LXVI.	After the Storm	637
LXVII.	Heu! Miser!	645
LXVIII.	Wounds upon Wounds	650
LXIX.	What Raoul had guessed	657
LXX.	Three Guests astonished to find themselves at Supper together	664
LXXI.	What took Place at the Louvre during the Supper at the Bastille	671

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

VICOMTE DE BRAGELONNE

Volume III

The First Quarrel . . . . . *Frontispiece*
Drawn by Edmund H Garrett.

The King and La Valliere . . . . . *Page* 280
Drawn by Edmund H Garrett.

Hampton Court . . . . . " 415
Drawn and etched by Félix Oudart

THE

VICOMTE DE BRAGELONNE.

CHAPTER I.

SHOWING WHAT NEITHER THE NAIAD NOR THE DRYAD HAD ANTICIPATED.

De Saint Aignan stopped at the foot of the staircase which led to the *entresol*, where the maids of honor resided, and to the first floor, where Madame's apartments were situated. Then, by a valet who was passing, he sent to summon Malicorne, who was still with Monsieur. After having waited ten minutes, Malicorne arrived, looking very suspicious and important. The king drew back towards the darkest part of the vestibule. De Saint-Aignan, on the contrary, advanced to meet Malicorne; but at the first words indicating his wish that person drew back abruptly.

"Oh!" he said, "you want me to introduce you into the rooms of the maids of honor?"

"Yes."

"You know very well that I cannot do anything of the kind, without being made acquainted with your object."

"Unfortunately, my dear M. Malicorne, it is quite impossible for me to give you any explanation; you must therefore confide in me as in a friend who got you out of a great difficulty yesterday, and who now begs you to extricate him from one to-day."

"Yet I told you, Monsieur, what I wanted, — that I did not wish to sleep in the open air, — and any honest man might express the same wish; while you, on the contrary, admit nothing."

"Believe me, my dear M. Malicorne," De Saint Aignan persisted, "that if I were permitted to explain myself, I would do so."

"In that case, my dear Monsieur, it is impossible for me to allow you to enter Mademoiselle de Montalais's apartment."

"Why so?"

"You know why better than any one else, since you caught me on the wall paying my addresses to Mademoiselle de Montalais; it would therefore be an excess of kindness on my part, you will admit, while I am paying attentions to her, to open the door of her room to you."

"But who told you that it was on her account I asked you for the key?"

"For whom, then?"

"She does not lodge there alone, I suppose?"

"No, certainly not."

"She rooms with Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"Yes. But really you have nothing more to do with Mademoiselle de la Vallière than with Mademoiselle de Montalais; and there are only two men to whom I would give this key, — to M. de Bragelonne, if he begged me to give it to him, and to the king, if he ordered me to do so."

"In that case give me the key, Monsieur; I order you to do so," said the king, advancing from the obscurity and partially opening his cloak. "Mademoiselle de Montalais will step down to talk with you, while we go upstairs to Mademoiselle de la Vallière; for, in fact, it is she only whom we require."

"The king!" exclaimed Malicorne, bowing down to the very ground.

"Yes, the king," said Louis, smiling, — "the king, who is as pleased with your resistance as with your capitulation. Rise, Monsieur, and render us the service we request of you."

"I obey, your Majesty," said Malicorne, leading the way up the staircase.

"Get Mademoiselle de Montalais to come down," said the king, "and do not breathe a word to her of my visit."

Malicorne bowed in sign of obedience, and proceeded up the staircase. But the king, after hasty reflection, followed him, and with such rapidity that although Malicorne was already more than half-way up the staircase, the king reached the room at the same moment that he did. He then observed, by the door which remained half open behind Malicorne, La Vallière, lying back in an arm-chair, and in the opposite corner Montalais, who in her dressing-gown was standing before a large mirror, engaged in arranging her hair, and parleying all the while with Malicorne. The king hurriedly opened the door, and entered the room. Montalais called out at the noise made by the opening of the door, and recognizing the king, made her escape. La Vallière, at the sight of him, rose from her seat, like a dead person who had been galvanized, and then fell back again in her arm-chair. The king advanced slowly towards her.

"You wished for an audience, Mademoiselle," he said coldly; "I am ready to hear you. Speak!"

De Saint-Aignan, faithful to his character of being deaf, blind, and dumb, had stationed himself in a corner of the doorway, upon a stool which chance seemed to have left there expressly for him. Concealed by the tapestry which served as a portière, and leaning his back against the wall,

in this way he listened without being seen; resigning himself to playing the part of a good watch-dog, who patiently waits and watches without ever getting in his master's way.

La Vallière, terror stricken at the king's irritated aspect, again rose, and assuming a posture full of humility and entreaty, murmured, "Forgive me, Sire."

"Eh! Mademoiselle, for what do you wish me to forgive you?" asked Louis.

"Sire, I have been guilty of a great fault; nay, more than a great fault, — a great crime."

"You?"

"Sire, I have offended your Majesty."

"Not the slightest degree in the world," replied Louis.

"I implore you, Sire, not to maintain towards me that terrible seriousness of manner which reveals your Majesty's just anger. I feel that I have offended you, Sire; but I wish to show you that I have not offended you of my own accord."

"In the first place, Mademoiselle," said the king, "in what way can you possibly have offended me? I cannot perceive how. Surely not on account of a young girl's harmless and very innocent jest? You turned the credulity of a young man into ridicule, — it was very natural to do so; any other woman in your place would have done the same."

"Oh! your Majesty overwhelms me by your words."

"And why so?"

"Because, if I had been the author of the jest, it would not have been innocent."

"Well, Mademoiselle, is that all you had to say to me in soliciting an audience?" said the king, as though about to turn away.

Thereupon La Vallière, in an abrupt and broken voice, her eyes burning with her hot tears, made a step towards the king, and said, "Did your Majesty hear everything?"

"Everything, what?"

"Everything I said beneath the royal oak."

"I did not lose a syllable, Mademoiselle."

"And when your Majesty heard me, could you have thought I had abused your credulity?"

"Credulity; yes, indeed, you have selected the very word."

"And your Majesty did not suppose that a poor girl like myself might possibly be compelled to submit to the will of others?"

'Forgive me," returned the king; "but I shall never be able to understand that she, who of her own free will could express herself so unreservedly beneath the royal oak, would allow herself to be influenced to such an extent by the direction of others"

"But the threat held out against me, Sire!"

"Threat! who threatened you? who dared to threaten you?"

"They who have the right to do so, Sire."

"I do not recognize any one as possessing the right to threaten in my kingdom."

"Forgive me, Sire; but near your Majesty, even, there are persons sufficiently high in position to have, or to believe that they have, the right to ruin a young girl without expectations, without fortune, and with only her reputation."

"In what way ruin her?"

"In depriving her of her reputation by disgracefully expelling her from the court."

"Oh, Mademoiselle de la Vallière," said the king,

bitterly, "I prefer those persons who exculpate themselves without incriminating others."

"Sire!"

"Yes; and I confess that I greatly regret to perceive that an easy justification, as your own might be, should have been complicated in my presence by a tissue of reproaches and imputations against others."

"And which you do not believe?" exclaimed La Vallière.

The king remained silent.

"Nay, but tell me!" repeated La Vallière, vehemently.

"I regret to confess it," replied the king, bowing coldly.

The young girl uttered a deep groan, striking her hands together in despair. "You do not believe me, then?" she said to the king, who still answered nothing, while poor La Vallière's features became visibly changed at his continued silence. "Therefore you believe," she said, "that I contrived this ridiculous, this infamous plot of trifling in so shameless a manner with your Majesty?"

"Nay," said the king, "it is neither ridiculous nor infamous, — it is not even a plot; it is merely a jest, more or less amusing, and nothing more."

"Oh!" murmured the young girl, in despair, "the king does not, and will not, believe me?"

"No, indeed, I will not believe you," said the king. "Besides, in point of fact, what can be more natural? The king, you argue, follows me, listens to me, watches me; the king wishes perhaps to amuse himself at my expense. I will amuse myself at his; and as the king is very tender-hearted, I will take his heart by storm."

La Vallière hid her face in her hands, as she stifled her sobs.

The king continued most pitilessly; he revenged himself upon the poor victim before him for all that he had

himself suffered. "Let us invent, then, this story of my loving him and preferring him to others. The king is so simple and so conceited that he will believe me; and then we can go and tell others how credulous the king is, and can enjoy a laugh at his expense."

"Oh!" exclaimed La Vallière, "to think that, to believe that, is frightful!"

"And," pursued the king, "that is not all; if this self-conceited prince should take our jest seriously, if he should be imprudent enough to exhibit before others anything like delight at it, well, in that case, the king will be humiliated before the whole court. And what a delightful story it will be some day for him to whom I am really attached, – a part of my dowry to bring my husband, — to have the adventure to relate of the king who was so amusingly deceived by a mischievous young girl!"

"Sire!" exclaimed La Vallière, her mind bewildered, almost wandering, indeed, "not another word, I implore you; do you not see that you are killing me?"

"A jest, nothing but a jest!" murmured the king, who however began to be somewhat affected.

La Vallière fell upon her knees, and that so violently that the sound could be heard upon the hard floor. Then, clasping her hands, "Sire," she said, "I prefer shame to disloyalty."

"What do you mean?" inquired the king, without moving a step to raise the young girl from her knees.

"Sire, when I shall have sacrificed both my honor and my reason to you, you will perhaps believe in my loyalty. The tale which was related to you in Madame's apartments, and by Madame herself, is utterly false; and that which I said beneath the great oak — "

"Well!"

"That only — that was the truth."

"What!" exclaimed the king.

"Sire," exclaimed La Vallière, hurried away by the violence of her emotions, "were I to die of shame on the very spot where my knees are fixed, I would repeat it until my latest breath; I said that I loved you, and it is true: I do love you."

"You!"

"I have loved you, Sire, from the very first day I saw you; from the moment when at Blois, where I was pining away my existence, your royal looks, full of light and life, were first bent upon me. I love you still, Sire. It is a crime of high treason, I know, that a poor girl like myself should love her sovereign and should presume to tell him so. Punish me for my audacity, despise me for my shameless immodesty; but do not ever say, do not ever think, that I have jested with or deceived you. I belong to a family whose loyalty has been proved, Sire; and I love — I love my king — oh! I am dying!"

Suddenly her strength, voice, and respiration ceased, and she fell forward, like the flower Virgil mentions, which the scythe of the reaper has touched. The king, at these words, at this vehement entreaty, no longer retained either ill-will or doubt in his mind; his whole heart seemed to expand at the glowing breath of that love which proclaimed itself in such noble and courageous language. When he heard the passionate avowal of that love, therefore, his strength seemed to fail him, and he hid his face in his hands. But when he felt La Vallière's hands clinging to his own, when their warm pressure fired his blood, he bent forward, and passing his arm round La Vallière's waist, raised her from the ground and pressed her to his heart. But she, her head fallen forward on her bosom, seemed to have ceased to live. The king, terrified, called out for De Saint-Aignan.

De Saint-Aignan, who had carried his discretion so far as to remain without stirring in his corner, pretending to wipe away a tear, ran forward at the king's summons. He then assisted Louis to seat the young girl upon a couch, chafed her hands, sprinkled some Queen of Hungary water over her face, saying over and over again: "Come, Mademoiselle, it is all over; the king believes you and forgives you. There, there now! take care, or you will agitate his Majesty too much, Mademoiselle; his Majesty is so sensitive, so tender-hearted. Now, really, Mademoiselle, you must pay attention, for the king is very pale."

The fact was, the king was visibly losing color. But La Vallière did not move.

"Really, Mademoiselle," continued De Saint-Aignan, "do pray recover, I beg, I implore you; it is really time you should. Think only of one thing, that if the king should become unwell, I should be obliged to summon his physician. What a state of things that would be! So do pray rouse yourself, Mademoiselle; make an effort, quick, quick!"

It was difficult to display more persuasive eloquence than De Saint-Aignan did, but something still more powerful and of a more energetic nature than this eloquence aroused La Vallière. The king, who was kneeling before her, covered the palms of her hands with those burning kisses which are to the hands what a kiss upon the lips is to the face. La Vallière's senses returned to her; she languidly opened her eyes, and with a look of anguish murmured, "Oh, Sire, has your Majesty pardoned me, then?"

The king did not reply, for he was still too much overcome. De Saint-Aignan thought it his duty again to retire; he had observed the flame which leaped from the eyes of his Majesty. La Vallière rose.

"And now, Sire," said she, courageously, "that I have

justified myself, at least I trust so, in your Majesty's eyes, grant me leave to retire into a convent. I shall bless your Majesty all my life, and I shall die there thanking and loving Heaven for having given me one day of perfect happiness."

"No, no!" replied the king; "you will live here, on the contrary, blessing Heaven, but loving Louis, who will make your existence one of perfect felicity, — Louis, who loves you, — Louis, who swears it."

"Oh, Sire, Sire!"

And upon this doubt of La Vallière, the king's kisses became so warm that De Saint-Aignan thought it his duty to retire behind the tapestry. These kisses, however, which she had not the strength at first to resist, began to trouble the young girl.

"Oh, Sire!" she exclaimed, "do not make me repent my loyalty, for this would show me that your Majesty despises me still."

"Mademoiselle," said the king, suddenly, drawing back with an air full of respect, "there is nothing in the world that I love and honor more than yourself; and nothing in my court, I call Heaven to witness, shall be so highly regarded as you shall be henceforward. I entreat your forgiveness for my transport, Mademoiselle, — it arose from an excess of love; but I can prove to you that I shall love still more while respecting you as much as you can possibly desire." Then bending before her and taking her by the hand, he said to her, "Will you honor me by accepting the kiss I press upon your hand?" And the king's lips were pressed respectfully and lightly upon the young girl's trembling hand. "Henceforth," added Louis, rising and bending his glance upon La Vallière, — "henceforth you are under my safeguard. Do not speak to any one of the injustice I have done you; forgive others that which

they may have been able to do you For the future you shall be so far above all those, that, far from inspiring you with fear, they shall be even beneath your pity;" and he bowed as reverently as though he were leaving a place of worship.

Then calling to De Saint-Aignan, who approached with great humility, the king said. "I hope, Count, that Mademoiselle de la Vallière will kindly confer a little of her friendship upon you, in return for that which I have vowed to her eternally."

De Saint-Aignan bent his knee before La Vallière, murmuring, "How happy, indeed, would such an honor make me!"

"I shall send your companion back to you," said the king. "Adieu, Mademoiselle, or, rather, *au revoir!* Do not forget me in your prayers, I entreat you."

"Oh, Sire!" said La Vallière, "be assured that you and Heaven are in my heart together."

These last words elated the king, who, full of happiness, hurried De Saint-Aignan down the stairs. Madame had not anticipated this *dénouement*, and neither the naiad nor the dryad had said a word about it.

CHAPTER II.

THE NEW GENERAL OF THE JESUITS.

WHILE La Vallière and the king were mingling together, in their first confession of love, all the bitterness of the past, all the happiness of the present, and all the hopes of the future, Fouquet had retired to the apartments which had been assigned to him in the château, and was conversing with Aramis upon the subjects which the king at that moment was forgetting.

"Now tell me," began Fouquet, after having installed his guest in an arm-chair and seated himself by his side, "tell me, M. d'Herblay, what is our position with regard to the Belle-Isle affair, and whether you have received any news about it."

"Monsieur the Superintendent," replied Aramis, "everything is going on in that direction as we wish; the expenses have been paid, and nothing has transpired of our designs."

"But what about the soldiers whom the king wished to send there?"

"I received news this morning that they had arrived there a fortnight ago."

"And how have they been treated?"

"In the best manner possible."

"But what has become of the former garrison?"

"The soldiers were landed at Sarzeau, and were sent off at once towards Quimper."

"And the new men?"

"Belong to us at this very moment."

"Are you sure of what you say, my dear M. de Vaunes?"

"Quite sure; and, moreover, you will see by and by how matters have turned out."

"Still, you are very well aware that of all the garrison towns Belle-Isle is the very worst."

"I know it, and have acted accordingly; no space to move about, no communications, none of the other sex, no gambling permitted. Well, it is a great pity," added Aramis, with one of those smiles so peculiar to him, "to see how much young people at the present day seek amusement, and how much, consequently, they incline towards the man who procures and pays for such amusements for them."

"But if they amuse themselves at Belle-Isle?"

"If they amuse themselves through the king's means, they will attach themselves to the king; but if they get bored to death through the king's means, and amuse themselves through M. Fouquet, they will be attached to M. Fouquet."

"And you informed my intendant, of course, so that immediately on their arrival—"

"By no means. They were left alone a whole week, to weary themselves at their ease; but at the end of the week they cried out, saying that the last officers amused themselves more than they did. Whereupon they were told that the former officers had been able to make a friend of M. Fouquet, and that M. Fouquet, knowing them to be friends of his, had from that moment done all he possibly could to prevent their getting wearied or bored upon his estates. Upon this they began to reflect. Immediately afterwards, however, the intendant added, that without anticipating M. Fouquet's orders, he knew his

master sufficiently well to be aware that he took an interest in every gentleman in the king's service, and that although he did not know the new-comers, he would do as much for them as he had done for the others."

"Excellent! and I trust that the promises were followed up; I desire, as you know, that no promise should ever be made in my name that is not fulfilled."

"Without a moment's loss of time, our two privateers and your own horses were placed at the disposal of the officers; the keys of the principal mansion were handed over to them, so that they made up hunting-parties, and excursions with such ladies as are to be found in Belle-Isle, and such others as they are enabled to enlist from the neighborhood who have no fear of seasickness."

"And there is a fair sprinkling to be met with at Sarzeau and Vannes, I believe, your Grace?"

"Yes; all along the coast," said Aramis, quietly.

"And now, for the soldiers?"

"Everything is precisely the same, in a relative degree, you understand; the soldiers have plenty of wine, excellent provisions, and good pay."

"Very good; so that —"

"So that this garrison can be depended upon, and it is a better one than the last."

"Good."

"The result is, if fortune favors us so that the garrisons are changed in this manner only every two months, that at the end of every three years the whole army will, in its turn, have been there; and therefore, instead of having one regiment in our favor, we shall have fifty thousand men."

"Yes, yes; I knew perfectly well," said Fouquet, "that no friend could be more precious and valuable than yourself, M. d'Herblay. But," he added, laughing,

"all this time we are forgetting our friend Du Vallon; what has become of him? During the three days I have spent at St. Mandé, I confess that I have forgotten him completely."

"I do not forget him, however," returned Aramis. "Porthos is at St. Mandé. All his joints are kept well greased; the greatest care is taken with regard to the food he eats and to the wines he drinks; I have made him take daily airings in the small park which you have kept for your own use, and he makes use of it accordingly. He begins to walk again; he exercises his muscular powers by bending down young elm-trees, or making the old oaks fly into splinters, as Milo of Crotona used to do; and as there are no lions in the park, it is not unlikely we shall find him alive. Our Porthos is a brave fellow."

"Yes; but in the mean time he will get wearied to death."

"He never does that."

"He will be asking questions?"

"He sees no one."

"At all events, he is looking or hoping for something or other?"

"I have inspired in him a hope which we will realize some fine morning; and he subsists on that."

"What is it?"

"That of being presented to the king."

"Oh! oh! in what character?"

"As the engineer of Belle-Isle, of course."

"Is it possible?"

"Quite true."

"Shall we not be obliged, then, to send him back to Belle-Isle?"

"Most certainly; I am even thinking of sending him back as soon as possible. Porthos is very fond of dis-

play; he is a man whose weaknesses D'Artagnan, Athos, and myself are alone acquainted with; he never commits himself in any way, — he is dignity itself. To the officers there he would seem like a Paladin of the time of the Crusades. He would make the whole staff drunk without getting so himself, and every one would regard him as an object of admiration and sympathy. If, therefore, we should happen to have any orders requiring to be carried out, Porthos is a living order; and whatever he chose to do, others would find themselves obliged to submit to."

"Send him back, then."

"That is what I intend to do; but not for a few days, for I must not omit to tell you one thing."

"What is it?"

"I begin to suspect D'Artagnan. He is not at Fontainebleau, as you may have noticed; and D'Artagnan is never absent or apparently idle without some object in view. And now that my own affairs are settled, I am going to try to ascertain what are the affairs in which D'Artagnan is engaged."

"Your own affairs are settled, you say?"

"Yes."

"You are very fortunate, in that case; and I should like to be able to say the same."

"I hope you do not make yourself uneasy."

"Hum!"

"Nothing could be better than the king's reception of you."

"True."

"And Colbert leaves you in peace."

"Almost so."

"In that case," said Aramis, with that connection of ideas which constituted his power, — "in that case, then,

we can bestow a thought upon the young girl I was speaking to you about yesterday."

"Whom do you mean?"

"What! have you forgotten already? I mean La Vallière."

"Ah! of course, of course."

"Do you object, then, to try to make a conquest of her?"

"In one respect only; my heart is engaged in another direction, and I positively do not care about the girl in the least."

"Oh!" said Aramis, "your heart is engaged, you say. The deuce! we must take care of that."

"Why?"

"Because it is terrible to have the heart occupied when others, besides yourself, have so much need of the head."

"You are right. So, you see, at your first summons I left everything. But to return to this girl. What good do you see in my troubling myself about her?"

"This: the king has taken a fancy to her; at least, so it is supposed."

"But you, who know everything, know very differently?"

"I know that the king has changed very quickly, — that the day before yesterday he was mad about Madame; that a few days ago Monsieur complained of it to the queen-mother, and that some conjugal misunderstandings and maternal scoldings were the consequence."

"How do you know all that?"

"I do know it; at all events, since these misunderstandings and scoldings the king has not addressed a word, has not paid the slightest attention, to her royal Highness."

"Well, what next?"

"Since then he has been taken up with Mademoiselle de la Vallière. Now, Mademoiselle de la Vallière is one

of Madame's maids of honor. You happen to know, I suppose, what is called à *chaperon* in matters of love. Well, then, Mademoiselle de la Vallière is Madame's *chaperon*. It is for you, therefore, to take advantage of this state of things. You have no need of that advantage. But, at all events, wounded vanity will render the conquest an easier one; the girl will get hold of the king's and Madame's secret, and you can hardly tell what a man of intelligence can do with a secret."

"But how to get at her?"

"Nay, you, of all men, to ask me such a question!" said Aramis.

"Certainly, I shall not have any time to busy myself with her."

"She is poor and unassuming, — you will create a position for her; and whether she makes the king subject to her as his mistress, or whether she only becomes his confidante, you will have gained a new disciple."

"Very good," said Fouquet. "What is to be done, then, with regard to this girl?"

"Whenever you have taken a fancy to any lady, Monsieur the Superintendent, what steps have you taken?"

"I have written to her, protesting my devotion to her. I have added, how happy I should be to render her any service in my power, and have signed 'Fouquet' at the end of the letter."

"And has any one offered any resistance?"

"One person only," replied Fouquet; "but four days ago she yielded, as the others had done."

"Will you take the trouble to write?" said Aramis, holding a pen towards Fouquet, which he took, saying:

"I will write at your dictation. My head is so taken up in another direction, that I should not be able to write two lines."

"Very well," said Aramis, "write."

And he dictated as follows: —

"I have seen you, and you will not be surprised to learn how beautiful I have found you. But for want of the position you merit at the court, your presence there is a waste of time. The devotion of a man of honor, should ambition of any kind inspire you, might possibly serve as a means of display for your talents and beauty. I place my devotion at your feet; but as devotion, however humble and discreet it may be, might possibly compromise the object of its worship, it would ill become a person of your merit to run the risk of being compromised, without her future being insured If you would deign to accept and reply to my love, my love shall prove its gratitude to you in making you free and independent forever."

Having finished writing, Fouquet looked at Aramis.

"Sign it," said the latter.

"Is it absolutely necessary?"

"Your signature at the foot of that letter is worth a million; you forget that, my dear superintendent." Fouquet signed.

"Now, by whom will you send the letter?" asked Aramis.

"By an excellent servant of mine."

"Can you rely on him?"

"He is a man who has been with me all my life."

"Very well. Besides, in this case, we are not playing for very heavy stakes."

"How so? For if what you say be true of the accommodating disposition of this girl for the king and Madame, the king will give her all the money she can ask for."

"The king has money, then?" asked Aramis.

"I suppose so, for he has not asked me for any more."

"Oh, he will ask for some soon, never fear!"

"Nay, more than that, I had thought he would have

spoken to me about the *fête* at Vaux, but he never said a word about it."

"He will be sure to do so, though."

"You must think the king's disposition a very cruel one, M. d'Herblay."

"It is not he who is so."

"He is young, and therefore he is kind."

"He is young, and either he is weak or his passions are strong; and M. Colbert holds his weaknesses and his passions in his villanous grasp."

"You admit that you fear him?"

"I do not deny it."

"In that case I am lost."

"Why so?"

"My only influence with the king has been through the money I commanded, and now I am a ruined man."

"Not so."

"How 'not so'? Do you know my affairs better than I do?"

"That is not unlikely."

"If he were to request this *fête* to be given?"

"You will give it, of course."

"But where is the money to come from?"

"Have you ever been in want of any?"

"Oh, if you only knew at what cost I procured the last supply!"

"The next shall cost you nothing."

"But who will give it to me?"

"I will."

"What! give me six millions?"

"Ten, if necessary."

"Upon my word, my dear D'Herblay," said Fouquet, "your confidence alarms me more than the king's displeasure. Who can you possibly be, after all?"

"You know me well enough, I should think."

"Of course; but what is it you are aiming at?"

"I wish to see upon the throne of France a king devoted to M. Fouquet, and I wish M. Fouquet to be devoted to me."

"Oh!" exclaimed Fouquet, pressing his hand, "as for belonging to you, I am yours entirely, but believe me, my dear D'Herblay, you are deceiving yourself."

"In what respect?"

"The king will never become devoted to me."

"I do not remember to have said that the king would be devoted to you."

"Why, on the contrary you have this moment said so."

"I did not say the king; I said a king."

"Is it not all the same?"

"No, on the contrary, it is quite different."

"I do not understand you."

"You will shortly, then. Suppose, for instance, the king in question were to be a very different person from Louis XIV."

"Another person?"

"Yes, who is indebted for everything to you."

"Impossible!"

"His very throne even."

"Oh, you are mad! There is no other man but Louis XIV. who can sit on the throne of France. I see none, not one."

"But I see one."

"Unless it be Monsieur," said Fouquet, looking at Aramis uneasily. "Yet Monsieur—"

"It is not Monsieur."

"But how can it be that a prince not of the royal line, that a prince without any right—"

"My king, or rather your king, will be everything that is necessary, be assured of that."

"Be careful, M. d'Herblay; you make my blood run cold, and my head swim."

Aramis smiled. "There is but little occasion for that," he replied.

"Again, I repeat, you terrify me!" said Fouquet.

Aramis smiled.

"You laugh," said Fouquet.

"The day will come when you will laugh too; only, at the present moment I must laugh alone."

"But explain yourself."

"When the proper day shall have arrived, I will explain all; fear nothing. You are no more Saint Peter than I am the Saviour; and yet I say to you, 'O man of little faith, wherefore dost thou doubt?'"

"Eh, *mon Dieu!* I cannot but doubt, because I do not see."

"That is because you are blind. I will no longer treat you like Saint Peter, but like Saint Paul, and I will say unto you, 'A day will come when thine eyes shall be opened.'"

"Oh," said Fouquet, "how willingly would I believe!"

"You do not believe! — you who through my means have ten times crossed the abyss yawning at your feet, and in which, had you been alone, you would have been swallowed up! You do not believe! — you who from attorney-general attained the rank of intendant, from the rank of intendant that of first minister of the crown, and who from the rank of first minister will pass to that of mayor of the palace! But, no," he said, with the same unaltered smile, "no, no, you cannot see, and consequently cannot believe that;" and Aramis rose to withdraw.

"One word more," said Fouquet. "You have never

yet spoken to me in this manner, you have never yet shown yourself so confident — I should rather say so daring."

"Because it is necessary, in order to speak confidently, to have the lips unfettered."

"And that is now your case?"

"Yes."

"Since a very short time, then?"

"Since yesterday only."

"Oh, M. d'Herblay, take care! Your confidence is becoming audacity."

"One can well be audacious when one is powerful."

"And you are powerful?"

"I have offered you ten millions, I offer them again to you."

Fouquet rose, much agitated and disturbed. "Come, come," he said; "you spoke of overthrowing kings and replacing them by others. God forgive me! but if I am not really out of my senses, is or is not that what you said just now?"

"You are not out of your senses, for it is perfectly true that I did say that just now."

"And why did you say so?"

"Because one may speak in this manner of thrones being cast down and kings being raised up, when one is one's self far above all kings and thrones, of this world at least."

"Your power is infinite, then?" cried Fouquet.

"I have told you so already, and I repeat it," replied Aramis, with glistening eyes and trembling lips.

Fouquet threw himself back in his chair, and buried his face in his hands. Aramis looked at him for a moment, as the angel of human destinies might have looked upon a simple mortal.

"Adieu!" he said to him; "sleep undisturbed, and send your letter to La Vallière. To-morrow we shall see each other again."

"Yes, to-morrow," said Fouquet, shaking his head like a man returning to his senses. "But where shall we see each other?"

"At the king's promenade, if you like."

"Very well;" and they separated.

CHAPTER III.

THE STORM.

THE dawn of the following day was dark and gloomy; and as every one knew that a ride was set down in the royal programme, every one's gaze, as his eyes opened, was directed towards the sky. Just above the tops of the trees a thick, suffocating vapor seemed to remain suspended, with hardly sufficient power to rise thirty feet above the ground under the influence of the sun's rays, which could barely be seen through the veil of a heavy and thick mist. That morning there was no dew; the turf was dried up for want of moisture, and the flowers were withered. The birds sang less cheerfully than usual amid the boughs, which remained as motionless as death. The strange, confused, and animated murmurs, which seemed born of the sun, and to exist by it, — that respiration of Nature which is unceasingly heard amid all other sounds, — could not be heard now; never had silence been so profound.

The king had noticed the cheerless aspect of the heavens as he approached the window immediately after rising. But as all the directions had been given respecting the drive, and every preparation had been made accordingly, and, what was far more imperious than everything else, as Louis relied upon this excursion to satisfy the cravings of his imagination, and we will even already say the clamorous desires of his heart, — the king unhesitatingly decided that the appearance of the heavens had nothing whatever to do with the matter, and that the excursion having been

appointed, should take place, whatever the state of the weather might be. Besides, there are in certain terrestrial realms privileged by Heaven times when it might almost be supposed that the expressed wish of an earthly monarch has its influence over the Divine will. It was Virgil who observed of Augustus, *Nocte placet tota redeunt spectacula mane.* Louis XIV. had Boileau, who ought to have told him something very different; and the Lord ought to have been as compliant to him as Jove was to Augustus. Louis attended Mass as usual, but it must be confessed that his attention was somewhat distracted from the presence of the Creator by the remembrance of the creature. His mind was occupied during the service in reckoning more than once the number of minutes, then of seconds, which separated him from the blissful moment when the departure would take place, — that is to say, the moment when Madame would set out with her maids of honor. As a matter of course, everybody at the château was ignorant of the interview which had taken place the evening before between La Vallière and the king. Montalais, perhaps, with her usual chattering propensity, might have been disposed to spread it abroad; but Montalais on this occasion was held in check by Malicorne, who had placed upon her lips the padlock of mutual interest.

As for Louis XIV., his happiness was so extreme that he had nearly or quite forgiven Madame her little piece of ill-nature of the previous evening. In fact, he had occasion to congratulate himself about it rather than to complain of it. Had it not been for her ill-natured action, he would not have received the letter from La Vallière; had it not been for the letter, he would have had no interview; and had it not been for the interview, he would have remained undecided. His heart was filled with too much happiness for any ill-feeling to remain in it, at that mo-

ment at least. Instead, therefore, of knitting his brows into a frown when he perceived his sister-in-law, Louis resolved to receive her in a still more friendly and gracious manner than usual. But that would be on one condition only, — that she would be ready to set out early.

Such was the nature of Louis's thoughts during Mass, — thoughts which made him during the holy service, it must be said, forget matters which in his character of Most Christian King and eldest son of the Church ought to have occupied his attention. Yet God is so kind towards youthful errors, — all which regards love, even blameworthy love, so easily finds forgiveness in his Fatherly eyes, — that on going out from Mass, Louis, raising his eyes to the heavens, could see through the rents in a cloud a strip of the azure carpet which is pressed by the foot of the Almighty. He returned to the château; and as the departure was fixed for midday only, and it was at present just ten o'clock, he set to work most desperately with Colbert and Lyonne. But even while he worked, Louis went from the table to the window which looked out upon Madame's pavilion; he saw M. Fouquet in the courtyard, to whom the courtiers, since the favor shown him on the previous evening, paid greater attention than ever, and who himself was coming with an affable and extremely cheerful air to present his respects to the king.

The king, instinctively, on noticing Fouquet, turned towards Colbert, who was smiling, and seemed full of benevolence and delight, — a state of feeling which had arisen from the very moment one of his secretaries had entered and handed him a pocket-book, which he had put unopened into his pocket. But as there was always something sinister at the bottom of any delight expressed by Colbert, Louis preferred, of the smiles of the two men,

those of Fouquet. He beckoned to the superintendent to come up, and then turning towards Lyonne and Colbert, he said: "Finish this matter, place it on my desk, and I will read it at my leisure;" and he left the room.

At the sign the king had made to him, Fouquet had hastened up the staircase, while Aramis, who was with the superintendent, had quietly retired among the group of undistinguished courtiers, and disappeared without having been even observed by the king. The king and Fouquet met at the top of the staircase.

"Sire," said Fouquet, remarking the gracious manner in which Louis was about to receive him, "your Majesty has overwhelmed me with kindness during the last few days. It is not a youthful monarch, but a young god, who reigns over France, — the god of pleasure, happiness, and love."

The king colored. The compliment, although flattering, was not the less somewhat direct. Louis conducted Fouquet to a small room which separated his study from his sleeping apartment.

"Do you know why I summoned you?" said the king, as he seated himself upon the edge of the casement, so as not to lose anything that might be passing in the gardens which fronted the opposite entrance to Madame's pavilion.

"No, Sire; but I am sure it was for something agreeable, if I am to judge from your Majesty's gracious smile."

"Ah, you prejudge!"

"No, Sire; I look and I see."

"You are mistaken, then."

"I, Sire?"

"For I summoned you, on the contrary, to pick a quarrel with you."

"With me, Sire?"

"Yes, and that a serious one."

"Really, your Majesty alarms me; and yet I wait most confident in your justice and goodness."

"Do you know, I am told, M. Fouquet, that you are preparing a grand *fête* at Vaux."

Fouquet smiled, as a sick man would at the first shiver of a fever which has left him but returns again.

"And that you have not invited me!" continued the king.

"Sire," replied Fouquet, "I have not even thought of the *fête* you speak of, and it was only yesterday evening that one of my *friends* [Fouquet laid stress upon the word] was kind enough to make me think of it."

"Yet I saw you yesterday evening, M. Fouquet, and you said nothing to me about it."

"Sire, how dared I hope that your Majesty would so greatly descend from your own exalted station as to honor my dwelling with your royal presence?"

"Excuse me, M. Fouquet, you did not speak to me about your *fête*."

"I did not allude to the *fête* before your Majesty, I repeat, in the first place, because nothing had been decided with regard to it, and, secondly, because I feared a refusal."

"And something made you fear a refusal, M. Fouquet? You see I am determined to push you hard."

"Sire, the profound wish I had that your Majesty should accept my invitation —"

"Well, M. Fouquet, nothing is easier, I perceive, than our coming to an understanding. Your wish is to invite me to your *fête*, — my own is to be present at it; invite me, and I will go."

"Is it possible that your Majesty will deign to accept?" murmured the superintendent.

"Why, really, Monsieur," said the king, laughing, "I think I do more than accept, — I think I invite myself."

"Your Majesty overwhelms me with honor and delight!" exclaimed Fouquet; "but I shall be obliged to repeat what M. de la Vieuville said to your ancestor Henry IV., *Domine, non sum dignus.*"

"To which I reply, M. Fouquet, that if you give a *fête*, I will go, whether I am invited or not."

"I thank your Majesty deeply," said Fouquet, as he raised his head beneath this favor, which he was convinced would be his ruin. But how could your Majesty have been informed of it?"

"By public rumor, M. Fouquet, which says such wonderful things of yourself and of the marvels of your house. Would you become proud, M. Fouquet, if the king were to be jealous of you?"

"I should be the happiest man in the world, Sire, since the very day on which your Majesty were to become jealous of Vaux, I should possess something worthy of being offered to you."

"Very well, M. Fouquet, prepare your *fête*, and open the doors of your house as widely as possible."

"It is for your Majesty to fix the day," said Fouquet.

"This day month, then."

"Has your Majesty any further commands?"

"Nothing, Monsieur the Superintendent, except from the present moment until then to have you near me as much as possible."

"I have the honor to form one of your Majesty's party for the ride."

"Very good. I am just now starting, M. Fouquet; for there are the ladies, I see, who are going to the appointed place."

With this remark, the king, with all the eagerness, not only of a young man, but of a young man in love, withdrew from the window, in order to take his gloves and

cane, which his valet held ready for him. The neighing of the horses and the rumbling of the wheels on the gravel of the courtyard were heard. The king descended the stairs; and at the moment he made his appearance upon the flight of steps, every one stopped. The king walked straight up to the young queen. The queen-mother, who was still suffering more than ever from the illness with which she was afflicted, did not wish to go out. Maria Theresa accompanied Madame in her carriage, and asked the king in what direction he wished to ride. The king, who had just seen La Vallière, still pale from the events of the previous evening, get into a carriage with three of her companions, told the queen that he had no preference, and wherever she would wish to go, he would accompany her. The queen then desired that the outriders should proceed in the direction of Apremont.

The outriders set off, accordingly, before the others. The king rode on horseback, and for a few minutes accompanied the carriage of the queen and Madame, with his hand resting upon the door. The weather had cleared up a little; but a kind of veil of dust, like a thick gauze, was still spread over the surface of the heavens, and the sun made every glittering atom of dust glisten again within the circuit of its rays. The heat was stifling; but as the king did not seem to pay any attention to the state of the weather, no one made himself uneasy about it, and the party, in obedience to the orders which had been given by the queen, took its course in the direction of Apremont.

The courtiers present were full of spirits; it was evident that every one tried to forget, and to make others forget, the bitter discussions of the previous evening. Madame, particularly, was delightful; in fact, seeing the king at the door of her carriage, as she did not suppose he would be there for the queen's sake, she hoped that

her prince had returned to remain with her. Hardly, however, had they proceeded a quarter of a mile on the road, when the king with a gracious smile saluted them and drew up his horse, leaving the queen's carriage to pass on, then that of the principal ladies of honor, and then all the others in succession, who, seeing the king stop, wished in their turn to stop too; but the king made a sign to them to continue their progress. When La Vallière's carriage passed, the king approached it, saluted the ladies, and was preparing to accompany the carriage of the maids of honor in the same way he had attended Madame's, when suddenly the whole file of carriages stopped. It appeared that the queen, uneasy because the king had left her, had just given orders for the performance of this manœuvre, the direction in which the promenade was to take place having been left to her. The king, having sent to inquire what her object was in stopping the carriages, was informed in reply that she wished to walk. She very probably hoped that the king, who was attending the carriage of the maids of honor on horseback, would not venture to attend the maids of honor themselves on foot.

They had arrived in the middle of the forest. The promenade, in fact, was not ill-timed, especially for those who were dreamers or lovers. From the little open space where the halt had just been made, three beautiful long walks, shady and undulating, stretched out before them. These walks were green with moss and arched over by foliage; and each one had its horizon, consisting of about a handbreadth of sky, seen through the interlacing of the branches of the trees. At the end of the walks the startled deer were seen hurrying to and fro, with manifest signs of uneasiness; first stopping for a moment in the middle of the path, and raising their heads, they fled with the speed of an arrow, or bounded into the depths of the

forest, where they disappeared from view. Now and then a rabbit, of philosophical mien, could be noticed quietly sitting upright, rubbing his muzzle with his fore-paws, and looking about inquiringly, as though wondering whether all these people who were approaching in his direction, and who had just disturbed him in his meditations and his meal, were not followed by some crooked legged dog, or whether some one of them had not a gun under his arm.

All alighted from their carriages as soon as they observed that the queen was doing so. Maria Theresa took the arm of one of her ladies of honor, and with a side-glance towards the king, who did not perceive that he was in the slightest degree the object of the queen's attention, entered the forest by the first path before her. Two of the outriders preceded her Majesty with long poles, which they used for the purpose of putting the branches of the trees aside, or removing the brambles which might impede her progress.

As soon as Madame alighted, she found the Comte de Guiche at her side, who bowed and placed himself at her disposal. Monsieur, delighted with his bath two days before, had announced his preference for the river, and, having given De Guiche leave of absence, had remained at the château with the Chevalier de Lorraine and Manicamp. He was not in the slightest degree jealous. He had been looked for to no purpose in the procession; but as Monsieur was a man who thought a great deal of himself, and usually contributed very little to the general pleasure, his absence had been a subject of satisfaction rather than of regret.

Every one had followed the example which the queen and Madame had set, doing just as they pleased, according as chance or fancy influenced them. The king, we have already observed, remained near La Vallière, and throw-

ing himself off his horse at the moment the door of her carriage was opened, offered her his hand to alight. Montalais and Tonnay-Charente immediately drew back and kept at a distance, — the former from calculated, the latter from prudent, motives. There was this difference, however, between the two, that the one had withdrawn from a wish to please the king, the other from the wish to displease him.

During the last half-hour the weather also had undergone a change. The clouds which had been spread over the sky, as if driven by a blast of heated air, had become massed together in the west; and afterwards, as if resisted by a contrary wind, were now advancing slowly and heavily towards them. The approach of the storm could be felt; but as the king did not perceive it, no one thought it was right to do so. The promenade was therefore continued. Some of the company, with minds ill at ease on the subject, raised their eyes from time to time towards the sky; others, even more timid, walked about without wandering too far from the carriages, where they expected to take shelter in case the storm burst. The greater part of the procession, however, observing that the king fearlessly entered the wood with La Vallière, followed his Majesty. The king, noticing this, took La Vallière's hand, and led her away by a side-path, where no one ventured to follow him.

5-3/30/A

CHAPTER IV.

THE SHOWER OF RAIN.

At this moment, and in the same direction in which the king and La Valliere were proceeding, except that they were in the wood itself instead of following the path, two men were walking together, utterly indifferent to the appearance of the heavens. Their heads were bent down in the manner of people occupied with matters of great moment. They had not observed either De Guiche and Madame, or the king and La Vallière. Suddenly something passed through the air like a stream of fire, followed by a loud but distant rumbling noise

"Ah!" said one of them, raising his head, "here is the storm. Let us regain our carriages, my dear D'Herblay."

Aramis looked inquiringly at the heavens. "There is no occasion to hurry yet," he said, and then, resuming the conversation where it had doubtless been interrupted, he said, "You were observing that the letter we wrote last evening must by this time have reached its destination?"

"I was saying that she certainly has it."

"By whom did you send it?"

"By my old servant, as I have already told you."

"Did he bring back an answer?"

"I have not seen him since. The young girl was probably in attendance on Madame, or was in her own room dressing, and he may have had to wait. Our time for leaving arrived; and we set off of course. I cannot, therefore, know what is going on yonder."

"Did you see the king before leaving?"

"Yes."

"How did he seem?"

"Nothing could be better or worse, according as he be sincere or hypocritical."

"And the *fête*?"

"Will take place in a month."

"He invited himself, you say?"

"With a pertinacity in which I detected Colbert's influence. But has not last night quite removed your illusions?"

"With respect to what?"

"With respect to the assistance you may be able to give me in this matter."

"No; I have passed the night writing, and all my orders are given."

"Do not conceal from yourself, D'Herblay, that the *fête* will cost several millions."

"I will give six; do you on your side get two or three, at all events."

"You are a wonderful man, my dear D'Herblay"

Aramis smiled.

"But," inquired Fouquet, with some remaining uneasiness, "how is it that while now you are squandering millions in this manner, a few days ago you did not pay the fifty thousand livres to Baisemeaux out of your own pocket?"

"Because a few days ago I was as poor as Job."

"And to-day?"

"To-day I am wealthier than the king himself."

"Very well," said Fouquet; "I understand men pretty well, — I know you are incapable of falsehood; I do not wish to wrest your secret from you, and so let us talk no more about it."

At this moment a dull, heavy rumbling was heard, which suddenly burst forth in a violent clap of thunder.

"Oh!" said Fouquet, "I was quite right in what I said."

"Come," said Aramis, "let us rejoin the carriages."

"We shall not have time," said Fouquet, "for here comes the rain."

In fact, as if the heavens were opened, a shower of large drops of rain was suddenly heard falling on the trees about them.

"Oh!" said Aramis, "we shall have time to reach the carriages before the foliage becomes saturated."

"It will be better," said Fouquet, "to take shelter somewhere, — in a grotto, for instance."

"Yes, but where are we to find a grotto?" inquired Aramis.

"I know one," said Fouquet, smiling, "not ten paces from here." Then looking round about him, he added, "Yes, we are quite right."

"You are very fortunate to have so good a memory," said Aramis, smiling in his turn; "but are you not afraid that your coachman, finding we do not return, will suppose that we have taken another road back, and that he will follow the carriages belonging to the court?"

"Oh, there is no fear of that!" said Fouquet. "Whenever I place my coachman and my carriage in any particular spot, nothing but an express order from the king could stir them. But it seems that we are not the only ones who have come so far, for I hear footsteps and the sound of voices."

As he spoke, Fouquet turned, and opened with his cane a mass of foliage which hid the path from his view. Aramis's glance as well as his own was directed at the same moment through the opening he had made.

"A woman!" said Aramis.

"A man!" said Fouquet.

"La Vallière!"

"The king!"

"Oh!" said Aramis, "is the king aware of your cavern as well? I should not be astonished if he were, for he seems to be on very good terms with the nymphs of Fontainebleau."

"Never mind," said Fouquet; "let us get there. If he is not aware of it, we shall see what he will do; if he should know it, as it has two openings, while he enters by one we can leave by the other."

"Is it far?" asked Aramis; "for the rain is beginning to penetrate."

"We are there now," said Fouquet, as he put aside a few branches, and an excavation of the rock could be observed, which had been entirely concealed by heaths, ivy, and a thick covert of small shrubs.

Fouquet led the way, followed by Aramis; but as the latter entered the grotto, he turned round, saying, "Yes, they are entering the wood; and see! they are bending their steps this way."

"Very well, let us make room for them," said Fouquet, smiling and pulling Aramis by his cloak. "But I do not think the king knows of my grotto."

"True," said Aramis; "they are looking about them, but it is only for a tree of denser foliage."

Aramis was not mistaken. The king's looks were directed upwards, and not around him. He held La Vallière's arm within his own, and her hand in his. La Vallière's feet began to slip on the damp grass. Louis again looked round him with greater attention than before, and perceiving an enormous oak with a thick growth of foliage hurriedly drew La Vallière beneath its protecting shelter. The poor girl looked round her on all

sides, and seemed half afraid, half desirous, of being followed. The king made her lean her back against the trunk of the tree, whose vast circumference, protected by the thickness of the foliage, was as dry as if at that moment the rain had not been falling in torrents. He himself remained standing before her with his head uncovered. After a few minutes some drops of rain penetrated through the branches of the tree and fell on the king's forehead, but he was not even aware of it.

"Oh, Sire!" murmured La Vallière, pushing the king's hat towards him. But the king simply bowed, and determinedly refused to cover his head.

"Now or never is the time to offer your place," said Fouquet in Aramis's ear.

"Now or never is the time to listen, and not lose a syllable of what they may have to say to each other," replied Aramis in Fouquet's ear.

In fact they both remained perfectly silent, and the king's voice reached them where they were.

"Believe me, Mademoiselle," said the king, "I perceive, or rather I can imagine, your uneasiness; believe how sincerely I regret to have separated you from the rest of the company, to bring you to a place where you will suffer from the rain. You are wet already, and perhaps are cold too?"

"No, Sire."

"And yet you tremble?"

"I am afraid, Sire, that my absence may be misinterpreted at the moment when all the others are certainly reassembled."

"I would be glad to propose returning to the carriages, Mademoiselle, but pray look and listen, and tell me if it be possible to attempt to make the slightest progress at the present moment?"

In fact, the thunder was still rolling, and the rain continued to fall in torrents.

"Besides," continued the king, "no possible interpretation can be made which would be to your discredit. Are you not with the King of France, — in other words, with the first gentleman of the kingdom."

"Certainly, Sire," replied La Vallière, "and it is a very distinguished honor for me; it is not, therefore, for myself that I fear the interpretations that may be made."

"For whom, then?"

"For yourself, Sire."

"For me, Mademoiselle?" said the king, smiling; "I do not understand you."

"Has your Majesty already forgotten what took place yesterday evening in her royal Highness's apartments?"

"Oh! forget that, I beg, or allow me to remember it for no other purpose than to thank you once more for your letter, and —"

"Sire," interrupted La Vallière, "the rain is falling, and your Majesty's head is uncovered."

"I entreat you not to think of anything but yourself, Mademoiselle."

"Oh!" said La Vallière, smiling, "I am a country girl, accustomed to roaming through the meadows of the Loire and the gardens of Blois, whatever the weather may be. And as for my clothes," she added, looking at her simple muslin dress, "your Majesty sees they are not much to risk."

"Indeed, Mademoiselle, I have already noticed more than once that you owed nearly everything to yourself and nothing to your toilet. You are not a coquette, and that is one of your greatest charms in my eyes."

"Sire, do not make me out better than I am, and say merely, 'You cannot be a coquette.'"

"Why so?"

"Because," said La Vallière, smiling, "I am not rich."

"You admit, then," said the king, quickly, "that you have a love for beautiful things."

"Sire, I regard only those things as beautiful which are within my reach. Everything which is too highly placed for me — "

"You are indifferent to?"

"Is foreign to me, as being prohibited."

"And I, Mademoiselle," said the king, "do not find that you are at my court on the footing you should be. The services of your family have not been sufficiently brought under my notice. The advancement of your family has been cruelly neglected by my uncle."

"Oh, not at all, Sire! His royal Highness Monseigneur le Duc d'Orléans has always been exceedingly kind to M. de Saint-Remy, my step-father. The services rendered were humble, and, properly speaking, our services have been adequately recognized. It is not every one who is happy enough to find opportunities of serving his sovereign with distinction. I have no doubt at all that if ever opportunities had been met with, my family's deeds would have been equal to their loyalty, but that happiness has never been ours."

"In that case, Mademoiselle, it belongs to kings to repair the want of opportunity; and most delightedly do I undertake to repair, in your instance, and with the least possible delay, the wrongs of fortune towards you."

"Nay, Sire," cried La Vallière, eagerly; "leave things, I beg, as they now are."

"What, Mademoiselle! you refuse what I ought and what I wish to do for you!"

"All I desired has been granted me, Sire, when the

honor was conferred upon me of forming one of Madame's household."

"But if you refuse for yourself, at least accept for your family."

"Your generous intention, Sire, bewilders and makes me apprehensive; for in doing for my family what your kindness urges you to do, your Majesty will raise up enemies for us, and enemies for yourself too. Leave me in my humble condition, Sire; leave to all the emotions I may experience the happy refinement of disinterestedness."

"The sentiments you express," said the king, "are indeed admirable."

"Quite true," murmured Aramis in Fouquet's ear, "and he cannot be accustomed to them."

"But," replied Fouquet, "suppose she were to make a similar reply to my letter."

"True!" said Aramis; "let us not anticipate, but wait the conclusion."

"And then, dear M. d'Herblay," added the superintendent, hardly able to appreciate the sentiments which La Vallière had just expressed, "it is very often a sound calculation to seem disinterested with monarchs."

"Exactly what I was thinking this very minute," said Aramis. "Let us listen."

The king approached nearer to La Vallière; and as the rain dripped more and more through the foliage of the oak, he held his hat over the head of the young girl, who raised her beautiful blue eyes towards the royal hat which sheltered her, and shook her head, sighing deeply as she did so.

"What melancholy thought," said the king, "can possibly reach your heart when I place mine as a rampart before it?"

"I will tell you, Sire. I had already once before

broached this question, which is so difficult for a young girl of my age to discuss, but your Majesty imposed silence on me. Your Majesty belongs not to yourself alone, you are married; and every sentiment which would separate your Majesty from the queen, in leading your Majesty to take notice of me, will be a source of the profoundest sorrow for the queen." The king endeavored to interrupt the young girl, but she continued with a suppliant gesture: "The queen loves your Majesty with an attachment which can be well understood, and follows with her eyes every step of your Majesty which separates you from her. Happy enough in having had her fate united to your own, she weepingly implores Heaven to preserve you to her, and is jealous of the faintest throb of your heart bestowed elsewhere." The king again seemed anxious to speak, but again did La Vallière venture to prevent him. "Would it not, therefore, be a most blamable action," she continued, "if your Majesty, a witness of this anxious and disinterested affection, gave the queen any cause for jealousy? Oh, forgive me, Sire, for the expression I have used! I well know it is impossible, or rather that it would be impossible, that the greatest queen of the whole world could be jealous of a poor girl like myself. But though a queen, she is still a woman; and her heart, like that of any of her sex, cannot close itself against the suspicions which such as are evilly disposed insinuate. For heaven's sake, Sire, think no more of me! I am unworthy of your regard."

"Oh, Mademoiselle," exclaimed the king, "do you not know that in speaking as you have done, you change my esteem for you into admiration?"

"Sire, you take my words for more than they are; you suppose me to be better than I really am, and attach a greater merit to me than God has ever given me. Spare me, Sire; for did I not know your Majesty to be the

most generous man in your kingdom, I should believe your Majesty were jesting."

"You do not, I know, fear such a thing; I am quite sure of that," exclaimed Louis.

"Sire, I shall be obliged to believe it, if your Majesty continues to hold such language towards me."

"I am a most unhappy prince, then," said the king, in a tone of regret which was not assumed, — "the unhappiest prince in all Christendom, since I am powerless to induce belief in my words in one whom I love the best in the wide world, and who almost breaks my heart by refusing to credit my regard for her."

"Oh, Sire!" said La Vallière, gently putting the king aside, who had approached nearer and nearer to her, "I think the storm has passed away now, and the rain has ceased."

At the very moment, however, that the poor girl, fleeing as it were from her own heart, which doubtless throbbed too much in unison with the king's, uttered these words, the storm undertook to contradict her. A bluish flash of lightning illumined the forest with a weird glare, and a peal of thunder, like a discharge of artillery, burst over their very heads, as if the height of the oak which sheltered them had attracted the thunderbolt. The young girl could not repress a cry of terror. The king with one hand drew her towards his heart, and stretched the other above her head, as though to shield her from the lightning. A moment's silence ensued, as the group, delightful as everything young and loving is delightful, remained motionless, while Fouquet and Aramis contemplated it in attitudes as motionless as were those of La Vallière and the king.

"Oh, Sire, Sire!" murmured La Vallière, "do you hear?" and her head fell upon his shoulder.

"Yes," said the king. "You see, the storm has not passed away."

"It is a warning, Sire." The king smiled. "Sire, it is the voice of heaven in anger."

"Be it so," said the king. "I agree to accept that peal of thunder as a warning, and even as a menace, if in five minutes from the present moment it is repeated with equal violence; but if not, permit me to think that the storm is a storm simply, and nothing more;" and the king at the same moment raised his head, as if to interrogate the heavens. But as if the heavens had been in agreement with Louis, during the five minutes' silence which elapsed after the burst of thunder which had alarmed the two lovers no renewed peal was heard; and when the thunder was again heard, it was plainly passing away, as if during those same five minutes the storm, put to flight, had traversed the heavens with the speed of the wings of the wind. "Well, Louise," said the king, in a low tone of voice, "will you still threaten me with the anger of heaven? You regarded the thunder as a warning; do you still believe it to be, in the least degree, an omen of misfortune?"

The young girl looked up, and saw that by this time the rain had penetrated the foliage above them, and was trickling down the king's face. "Oh, Sire, Sire!" she exclaimed, in accents of eager apprehension, which greatly agitated the king. "Is it for me," she murmured, "that the king remains thus uncovered, and exposed to the rain? What am I, then?"

"You are, you perceive," said the king, "the divinity who dissipates the storm, the goddess who brings back the sun."

In fact, a ray of sunlight streamed through the forest, and caused the rain-drops which dripped from the leaves

or fell vertically through the openings in the branches of the trees to glisten like diamonds.

"Sire," said La Vallière, almost overcome, but making a powerful effort over herself, — "Sire, once again think of the trouble your Majesty will have to submit to on my account. At this very moment they are seeking you in every direction. The queen must be full of uneasiness, and Madame — oh, Madame!" the young girl exclaimed, with an expression which almost resembled terror.

This name had a certain effect upon the king. He started, and disengaged himself from La Vallière, whom he had till that moment held in his embrace. He then advanced towards the path, in order to look round, and returned somewhat thoughtfully to La Vallière. "Madame, did you say?" he remarked.

"Yes, Madame; she too is jealous," said La Vallière, with a marked accent; and her eyes, so timorous in their expression and so modestly fugitive in their glance, for a moment ventured to question the eyes of the king.

"Still," returned Louis, making an effort over himself, "it seems to me that Madame has no reason, no right, to be jealous of me."

"Alas!" murmured La Vallière.

"Oh, Mademoiselle," said the king, almost in a tone of reproach, "are you among those who think that the sister has a right to be jealous of the brother?"

"It is not for me, Sire, to penetrate your Majesty's secrets."

"You do believe it, then, like the others?" exclaimed the king.

"I do believe Madame is jealous, Sire," La Vallière replied firmly.

"Is it possible," said the king, with some anxiety, "that you have perceived it, then, from her conduct to-

wards you? Have her manners in any way been such towards you that you can attribute them to the jealousy you speak of?"

"Not at all, Sire; I am of so little importance."

"Oh, if it were really the case--" exclaimed Louis, violently.

"Sire," interrupted the young girl, "it has ceased raining; some one is coming, I think;" and forgetful of all etiquette, she seized the king by the arm.

"Well," replied the king, "let them come. Who is there who would venture to think I had done wrong in remaining alone with Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"For pity's sake, Sire! they will think it strange to see you wet through in this manner, and that you should have run such risk for me."

"I have simply done my duty as a gentleman," said Louis; "and woe to him who may fail in his, in criticising his sovereign's conduct!"

In fact, at this moment a few eager and curious persons were seen in the walk, as if engaged in a search, who, observing the king and La Vallière, seemed to have found what they were seeking. They were some of the courtiers who had been sent by the queen and Madame, and who immediately uncovered themselves, in token of having perceived his Majesty. But Louis, notwithstanding La Vallière's confusion, did not quit his respectful and tender attitude. Then, when all the courtiers were assembled in the walk, — when every one had been able to perceive the mark of deference with which he had treated the young girl, by remaining standing and bareheaded before her during the storm, — he offered her his arm, led her towards the group who were waiting, recognized by an inclination of the head the respectful salutations which were paid him on all sides, and

still holding his hat in his hand, conducted her to her carriage. And as the rain still continued to fall, — a last adieu of the departing storm, — the other ladies, whom respect had prevented from getting into their carriages before the king, remained, altogether unprotected by hood and cloak, exposed to the rain from which the king, with his hat over her, was protecting, as much as he was able, the humblest among them.

The queen and Madame, like the others, witnessed this exaggerated courtesy of the king. Madame was so disconcerted at it that she touched the queen with her elbow, saying, "Look there! look there!"

The queen closed her eyes, as if she had been suddenly seized with a fainting attack. She lifted her hand to her face and entered her carriage, Madame following her. The king again mounted his horse, and without showing a preference for any particular carriage-door, returned to Fontainebleau, absorbed in thought, the reins hanging on his horse's neck.

As soon as the crowd had disappeared, and the sound of the horses and carriages grew fainter in the distance, and when they were certain that no one could see them, Aramis and Fouquet came out of their grotto, and both of them in silence passed into the walk. Aramis looked most narrowly not only at the whole extent of the open space stretching out before and behind him, but even into the very depths of the wood.

"M. Fouquet," he said, when he had quite satisfied himself that they were alone, "we must get back, at any cost, the letter you wrote to La Vallière."

"That will be easy enough," said Fouquet, "if my servant has not given it to her."

"In any case it must be done; do you understand?"

"Yes; the king is in love with this girl, you mean?"

"Exceedingly so; and what is worse is that on her side the girl is passionately attached to the king."

"As much as to say that we must change our tactics, I suppose?"

"Not a doubt of it; you have no time to lose. You must see La Vallière, and without thinking any more of becoming her lover, which is out of the question, you must declare yourself her dearest friend and her most humble servant."

"I will do so," replied Fouquet, "and without the slightest feeling of disinclination, for she seems a good-hearted girl."

"Or a clever one," said Aramis; "but in that case the greater reason." Then he added, after a moment's pause, "If I am not mistaken, that girl will become the strongest passion of the king. Let us return to our carriage, and as fast as possible to the château."

CHAPTER V.

TOBY.

Two hours after the superintendent's carriage had set off by Aramis's directions, conveying them both towards Fontainebleau with the fleetness of the clouds which the last breath of the tempest was hurrying across the face of the heavens, La Vallière was closeted in her own apartment, dressed in a simple muslin wrapper, having just finished a slight repast, which was served upon a small marble table. Suddenly the door was opened, and a servant entered to announce M. Fouquet, who had called to request permission to pay his respects to her. She made him repeat the message twice over; for the poor girl only knew M. Fouquet by name, and could not conceive what she could possibly have to do with a superintendent of finances. However, as he might possibly come from the king, — and after the conversation we have recorded, it was very likely, — she glanced at her mirror, drew out still more the long ringlets of her hair, and desired him to be admitted. La Vallière could not, however, refrain from a certain feeling of uneasiness. A visit from the superintendent was not an ordinary event in the life of any woman attached to the court. Fouquet, so notorious for his generosity, his gallantry, and his sensitive delicacy of feeling with regard to women generally, had received more invitations than he had requested audiences. In many houses the presence of the superintendent had been significant of fortune; in many hearts, of love.

Fouquet entered the apartment with a manner full of respect, presenting himself with that ease and gracefulness of manner which was the distinctive characteristic of the men of eminence of that period, and which at the present day seems no longer to be understood, even in the portraits of the period in which the painter has endeavored to recall them into being. La Vallière acknowledged Fouquet's ceremonious salutation with a timid girl's courtesy, and motioned him to a seat. But Fouquet, with a bow, said, "I will not sit down, Mademoiselle, until you have pardoned me."

"I?" asked La Vallière; "pardoned what?"

Fouquet fixed a most piercing look upon the young girl, and fancied he could perceive in her face nothing but the most unaffected surprise. "I observe, Mademoiselle," he said, "that you have as much generosity as intelligence, and I read in your eyes the forgiveness I solicit. A pardon pronounced by your lips is insufficient for me, and I need the forgiveness of your heart and mind."

"Upon my honor, Monsieur," said La Vallière, "I assure you that I do not understand you."

"Again, that is a delicacy on your part which charms me," replied Fouquet, "and I see you do not wish me to blush before you."

"Blush, blush before me? Why should you blush"

"Can I have deceived myself?" said Fouquet; "and can I have been happy enough not to have offended you by my conduct towards you?"

"Really, Monsieur," said La Vallière, shrugging her shoulders, "you speak in enigmas, and I am too ignorant, it seems, to understand you."

"Be it so," said Fouquet; "I will not insist. Tell me only, I entreat you, that I may rely upon your full and complete forgiveness."

"I have but one reply to make to you, Monsieur," said La Vallière, somewhat impatiently, "and I hope that will satisfy you. If I knew the wrong you have done me, I would forgive you, and I do so with still greater reason since I am ignorant of the wrong you allude to."

Fouquet bit his lips, as Aramis would have done. "In that case," he said, "I may hope that, notwithstanding what has happened, our good understanding will remain undisturbed, and that you will kindly confer upon me the favor of believing in my respectful friendship."

La Vallière fancied that she now began to understand, and said to herself, "I should not have believed M. Fouquet so eager to seek the source of a favor so very recent;" and then added aloud: "Your friendship, Monsieur! you offer me your friendship! The honor, on the contrary, is mine, and I feel overpowered by it."

"I am aware, Mademoiselle," replied Fouquet, "that the friendship of the master may appear more brilliant and desirable than that of the servant; but I assure you the latter will be quite as devoted, quite as faithful, and altogether disinterested."

La Vallière bowed, for in fact the voice of the superintendent seemed to convey both conviction and real devotion in its tone, and she held out her hand to him, saying, "I believe you."

Fouquet eagerly took the hand that the young girl extended to him. "You see no difficulty, therefore," he added, "in restoring me that unhappy letter?"

"What letter?" inquired La Vallière.

Fouquet interrogated her with his most searching gaze, as he had already done before; but the same innocent expression, the same candid look, met his. "I am obliged to confess, Mademoiselle," he said, after this denial, "that your system is the most delicate in the world, and I should

not feel that I was a man of honor if I were to suspect anything of a woman so generous as yourself."

"Really, M. Fouquet," replied La Vallière, "it is with profound regret that I am obliged to repeat that I absolutely understand nothing of what you refer to."

"In fact, then, upon your honor, Mademoiselle, you have not received any letter from me?"

"Upon my honor, none," replied La Vallière, firmly.

"Very well, that is quite sufficient; permit me, then, Mademoiselle, to renew the assurance of my utmost esteem and respect," said Fouquet. Then, bowing, he left the room to seek Aramis, who was waiting for him in his own apartment, and leaving La Vallière to ask herself whether the superintendent had not lost his senses.

"Well," inquired Aramis, who was impatiently awaiting Fouquet's return, "are you quite satisfied with the favorite?"

"Enchanted!" replied Fouquet; "she is a woman full of intelligence and fine feeling."

"She did not get angry, then?"

"Far from that, she did not even seem to understand."

"To understand what?"

"To understand that I had written to her."

"She must, however, have understood you sufficiently to give the letter back to you, for I presume she returned it."

"Not at all."

"At least, you satisfied yourself that she had burned it."

"My dear M. d'Herblay, I have been playing at cross purposes for more than an hour; and however amusing it may be, I begin to have had enough of this game. So understand me thoroughly. The girl pretended not to

understand what I was saying to her; she denied having received any letter; therefore, having positively denied its receipt, she was unable either to return or to burn it."

"Oh!" said Aramis, with uneasiness, "what is that you say?"

"I say that she swore most positively she had not received any letter."

"That is too much. And you did not insist?"

"On the contrary, I did insist, almost impertinently so, even."

"And she persisted in her denial?"

"Unhesitatingly."

"And she did not contradict herself once?"

"Not once."

"But in that case, my friend, you have left our letter in her hands?"

"How could I do otherwise?"

"Oh, it was a great mistake!"

"What the deuce would you have done in my place?"

"One could not force her, certainly; but it is very embarrassing. Such a letter ought not to remain in existence against us."

"Oh, the young girl's disposition is generosity itself; I read her eyes, and I am convinced of it."

"You think she can be relied upon?"

"From my heart I do."

"Well, I think we are mistaken."

"In what way!"

"I think that, in point of fact, as she herself told you, she did not receive the letter."

"What! do you suppose —"

"I suppose that, from some motive, of which we know nothing, your man did not deliver the letter to her."

Fouquet rang the bell. A servant appeared. "Send Toby here," he said.

A moment afterwards a man made his appearance, with a restless look, a shrewd expression about the mouth, with short arms, and his back somewhat bent. Aramis fixed a penetrating look upon him.

"Will you allow me to ask him a few questions myself?" inquired Aramis.

"Do so," said Fouquet.

Aramis was about to say something to the lackey, when he paused. "No," he said; "he would see that we attach too much importance to his answer. Question him yourself; I will pretend to write." Aramis accordingly placed himself at a table, his back turned towards the old attendant, whose every gesture and look he watched in a looking-glass opposite to him.

"Come here, Toby!" said Fouquet to the valet, who approached with a tolerably firm step. "How did you execute my commission?" inquired Fouquet.

"In the usual way, Monseigneur," replied the man.

"But how? Tell me."

"I succeeded in penetrating as far as Mademoiselle de la Vallière's apartment; but she was at Mass, and so I placed the note on her toilet-table. Is not that what you told me to do?"

"Precisely; and is that all?"

"Absolutely all, Monseigneur."

"No one was there?"

"No one."

"Did you conceal yourself as I told you?"

"Yes"

"And she returned?"

"Ten minutes afterwards."

"And no one could have taken the letter?"

"No one; for no one had entered the room."

"From the outside; but from the interior?"

"From the place where I was secreted, I could see to the very end of the room."

"Now, listen to me," said Fouquet, looking fixedly at the lackey: "if this letter failed to reach its proper destination, confess it; for if a mistake has been made, your head shall be the forfeit."

Toby started, but immediately recovered himself. "Monseigneur," he said, "I put the letter in the very place I told you; and I ask only half an hour to prove to you that the letter is in Mademoiselle de la Vallière's hands, or to bring you back the letter itself."

Aramis looked at the valet scrutinizingly. Fouquet was naturally disposed to place confidence in people, and for twenty years this man had served him faithfully. "Go," he said; "but bring me the proof you speak of." The lackey quitted the room.

"Well, what do you think of it?" inquired Fouquet of Aramis.

"I think that you must, by some means or other, assure yourself of the truth. I think that the letter either has or has not reached La Vallière, — that, in the first case, La Vallière must return it to you, or satisfy you by burning it in your presence; that in the second, you must have the letter back again, even were it to cost you a million. Come, is not that your opinion?"

"Yes; but still, my dear bishop, I believe that you are exaggerating the situation."

"Blind! how blind you are!" murmured Aramis.

"La Vallière," returned Fouquet, "whom we assume to be a politician of the greatest ability, is simply nothing more than a coquette, who hopes that I shall pay my court to her because I have already done so, and who,

now that she has received a confirmation of the king's regard, hopes to keep me in leading strings with the letter. It is natural enough!"

Aramis shook his head.

"Is not that your opinion?" said Fouquet.

"She is not a coquette," he replied.

"Allow me to tell you —"

"Oh, I am well enough acquainted with women who are coquettes!" said Aramis.

"My dear friend!"

"It is a long time since I finished my studies, you mean. But women do not change."

"True; but men change, and you at the present day are far more suspicious than you formerly were;" and then, beginning to laugh, he added, "Come, if La Vallière is willing to love me only to the extent of a third and the king two thirds, do you think the condition acceptable?"

Aramis rose impatiently. "La Vallière," he said, "has never loved, and will never love, any one but the king."

"At all events," said Fouquet, "what would you do?"

"Ask me rather what I would have done."

"Well, what would you have done?"

"In the first place, I should not have allowed that man to go away."

"Toby!"

"Yes; Toby is a traitor. Nay, I am sure of it, and I would not have let him go until he had told me the truth."

"There is still time. I will recall him, and do you question him in your turn."

"Agreed!"

"But I assure you it is quite useless. He has been with me for the last twenty years, and has never occasioned me the slightest embarrassment; and yet," added Fouquet, laughing, "it would have been easy enough."

"Still, call him back! This morning I fancy I saw that man in earnest conversation with one of M. Colbert's men."

"Where was that?"

"Opposite the stables."

"Bah! all my people are at drawn daggers with those of that fellow."

"I saw him, I tell you; and his face, which I did not at first recognize when he entered just now, struck me in a disagreeable manner."

"Why did you not say something, then, while he was here?"

"Because it is only at this very minute that my memory is clear upon the subject."

"Really," said Fouquet, "you alarm me;" and he again rang the bell.

"Provided that it is not already too late," said Aramis.

Fouquet once more rang impatiently. The valet usually in attendance appeared. "Toby!" said Fouquet, "send Toby!" The valet again shut the door.

"You leave me at perfect liberty, I suppose?"

"Entirely so."

"I may employ all means, then, to ascertain the truth."

"All."

"Intimidation, even?"

"I constitute you public prosecutor in my place."

They waited ten minutes longer, but in vain; and Fouquet, thoroughly out of patience, again rang loudly. "Toby!" he exclaimed.

"Monseigneur," said the valet, "they are looking for him."

"He cannot be far distant. I have not given him any commission to execute."

"I will go and see, Monseigneur," replied the valet, as he closed the door.

Aramis during this interval walked impatiently but silently up and down the study. Again they waited another ten minutes. Fouquet rang in a manner to awaken a whole city of the dead. The valet again presented himself, trembling in a way to induce a belief that he was the bearer of bad news.

"Monseigneur is mistaken," he said, before even Fouquet could question him; "you must have given Toby some commission, for he has been to the stables and taken your Lordship's swiftest horse, and saddled it himself."

"Well?"

"And he has gone off."

"Gone!" exclaimed Fouquet. "Let him be pursued, let him be captured."

"Nay, nay," said Aramis, taking him by the hand, "be calm; the evil is done now."

"The evil is done, you say?"

"No doubt; I was sure of it. And now let us give no cause for suspicion; we must calculate the result of the blow and ward it off, if possible."

"After all," said Fouquet, "the evil is not great."

"You think so?" said Aramis.

"Of course. Surely a man is allowed to write a love-letter to a woman."

"A man, certainly; a subject, no, — especially when the woman in question is one with whom the king is in love."

"But, my friend, the king was not in love with La Vallière a week ago; he was not in love with her yesterday, and the letter is dated yesterday. I could not guess the king was in love, when the king's affection was not even yet in existence."

"As you please," replied Aramis; "but unfortunately the letter is not dated, and it is that circumstance partic-

ularly which annoys me. If it had only been dated yesterday, I should not have the slightest shadow of uneasiness on your account."

Fouquet shrugged his shoulders. "Am I not my own master," he said; "and is the king, then, king of my brain and of my flesh?"

"You are right," replied Aramis; "do not let us give more importance to matters than is necessary; and besides — Well, if we are menaced, we have means of defence."

"Oh, menaced!" said Fouquet, "you do not place this gnat-bite as it were among the number of menaces which may compromise my fortunes and my life, do you?"

"Do not forget, M. Fouquet, that the bite of an insect can kill a giant, if the insect be venomous."

"But has this sovereign power you were speaking of already vanished?"

"I am all-powerful, it is true, but I am not immortal."

"Come, then, the most pressing matter is to find Toby again, I suppose. Is not that your opinion?"

"Oh! as for that, you will not find him again," said Aramis; "and if he was of any great value to you, you must give him up for lost."

"At all events, he is somewhere in the world," said Fouquet.

"You are right; let me act," replied Aramis.

CHAPTER VI.

MADAME'S FOUR CHANCES.

ANNE OF AUSTRIA had begged the young queen to pay her a visit. For some time past suffering most acutely, and losing both her youth and beauty with that rapidity which marks the decline of women for whom life has been a long contest, Anne of Austria had, in addition to her physical sufferings, to experience the bitterness of being no longer held in any esteem, except as a living remembrance of the past, amid the youthful beauties, wits, and powers of her court. Her physician's opinions, her mirror also, grieved her far less than the inexorable warnings which the society of the courtiers afforded, who, like the rats in a ship, abandon the hold into which the water is on the point of penetrating, owing to the ravages of decay.

Anne of Austria did not feel satisfied with the time her eldest son devoted to her. The king, a good son rather from affectation than from affection, had at first been in the habit of passing an hour in the morning and one in the evening with his mother; but since he had himself undertaken the conduct of State affairs, the duration of the morning and evening visits had been reduced to half an hour each; and then, by degrees, the morning visit had been omitted altogether. They met at Mass; the evening visit was replaced by a meeting either at the king's assembly or at Madame's, which the queen attended obligingly enough, out of regard to her two sons. The result was that Madame had acquired an immense influence over the

court, which made her apartments the true royal place of meeting. This Anne of Austria had perceived; feeling herself to be suffering, and condemned by her sufferings to frequent solitude, she was distressed at the idea that the greater part of her future days and evenings would pass away solitary, useless, and in despondency. She recalled with terror the isolation in which Cardinal Richelieu had formerly left her, — those dreaded and insupportable evenings during which, however, she had for consolation youth and beauty, which are always accompanied by hope. She next formed the project of transporting the court to her own apartments, and of attracting Madame, with her brilliant escort, to her gloomy and already sorrowful abode, where the widow of a king of France and the mother of a king of France was reduced to console, in her anticipated widowhood, the always weeping wife of a king of France.

Anne began to reflect. She had intrigued a good deal in her life. In the good times past, when her youthful mind nursed projects which were invariably successful, she then had by her side, to stimulate her ambition and her love, a friend of her own sex, more eager, more ambitious than herself, — a friend who had loved her (a rare circumstance at court), and whom some petty considerations had removed from her forever. But for many years past — except Madame de Motteville, and La Molena, her Spanish nurse, a confidante in her character of countrywoman and woman too — who could boast of having given good advice to the queen; or who, among all the youthful heads there, could recall the past for her, — that past in which alone she lived?

Anne of Austria remembered Madame de Chevreuse, in the first place exiled rather by her wish than by the king's, and then dying in exile, the wife of a gentleman of obscure birth and position. She asked herself what Madame de

Chevreuse would formerly have advised her in a similar circumstance, in the mutual difficulties arising from their intrigues; and after serious reflection it seemed as if her clever, subtle friend, full of experience and sound judgment, answered her in her ironical tone: "All these insignificant young people are poor and greedy of gain. They require gold and incomes to support their pleasures; it is by interest you must gain them over." Anne of Austria adopted this plan. Her purse was well filled, and she had at her disposal a considerable sum of money, which had been amassed by Mazarin for her, and lodged in a place of safety. She possessed the most magnificent jewels in France, among which, and especially worthy of mention, were pearls so large that they made the king sigh every time he saw them, because the pearls of his crown were like millet-seed compared to them.

Anne of Austria no longer had beauty or charms at her disposal. She gave out, therefore, that her wealth was great; and as an inducement for others to visit her apartments, she let it be known that there were good gold crowns to be won at play, or that handsome presents were likely to be given on days when all went well with her, or annuities which she had wrung from the king by entreaty in order to maintain her credit. And in the first place she tried these means upon Madame, because to gain her consent was of more importance than anything else. Madame, notwithstanding the bold confidence with which her youth and her talents inspired her, blindly ran head-foremost into the net which had been stretched out before her. Enriched by degrees by these presents and transfers of property, she took a fancy to these inheritances by anticipation. Anne of Austria adopted the same means towards Monsieur, and even towards the king himself. She instituted lotteries in her apartments.

The day on which the present chapter opens, invitations had been issued for a late supper in the queen-mother's apartments, as she intended that two beautiful diamond bracelets of exquisite workmanship should be put up for lottery. The medallions were antique cameos of the greatest value; the diamonds, in point of intrinsic value, did not represent a very considerable amount, but the originality and rarity of the workmanship were such that every one at court not only wished to possess the bracelets, but even to see them on the arms of the queen herself; and on the days when she wore them, it was considered a favor to be allowed to admire them in kissing her hands. The courtiers had, even with regard to this subject, adopted various expressions of gallantry to establish the aphorism that the bracelets would have been priceless in value if they had not been unfortunate enough to be placed in contact with arms as beautiful as the queen's. This compliment had been honored by a translation into all the languages of Europe, and numerous were the verses in Latin and French which had been circulated on the subject.

The day when Anne of Austria determined upon a lottery was in a critical period. The king had not been near his mother for two days. Madame, after the great scene of the dryads and naiads, was sulking by herself. The king's fit of sulkiness was over, but an all-absorbing occupation of mind raised him above the stormy disputes and the giddy pleasures of the court.

Anne of Austria effected a diversion by the announcement of the famous lottery to take place in her apartments on the following evening. With this object in view, she saw the young queen, whom, as we already know, she had invited to pay her a visit in the morning. "My daughter," she said to her, "I have good news to tell you;

the king has been saying the most tender things to me about you. He is young, you know, and easily drawn away; but so long as you keep near me, he will not venture to keep away from you, — to whom, besides, he is most warmly and affectionately attached. I intend to have a lottery this evening, and shall expect to see you."

"I have heard," said the young queen, with a sort of timid reproach, "that your Majesty intends to put in lottery those beautiful bracelets whose rarity is so great that we ought not to allow them to pass out of the custody of the crown, even were there no other reason than that they had once belonged to you."

"My daughter," said Anne of Austria, who read the young queen's thoughts, and wished to console her for not having received the bracelets as a present, "it is necessary that I should attract Madame always to my apartments."

"Madame!" said the young queen, blushing.

"Of course; would you not prefer to have a rival near you, whom you could watch and rule over, than to know that the king is with her, always as ready to flirt with her as she with him. The lottery I have proposed is my means of attraction for that purpose; do you blame me?"

"Oh, no!" returned Maria Theresa, clapping her hands with a childlike expression of delight.

"And you no longer regret, then, my dear, that I did not give you these bracelets, as I had at first intended to do?"

"Oh, no, no, my kind mother!"

"Very well, my dear daughter; make yourself look as beautiful as possible, that our supper may be very brilliant; the gayer you seem, the more charming you appear, and you will eclipse all the ladies present as much by your brilliancy as by your rank."

Maria Theresa left full of delight. An hour afterwards, Anne of Austria received a visit from Madame, whom she covered with caresses, saying, "Excellent news! the king is charmed with my lottery."

"But I," replied Madame, "am not quite so charmed; to see such beautiful bracelets on any one's arms but yours or mine is what I cannot reconcile myself to."

"Well, well," said Anne of Austria, concealing by a smile a violent pain which she had just experienced, "do not alarm yourself, young lady, and do not look at things in the worst light immediately."

"Ah, Madame, Fortune is blind, and I am told there are two hundred tickets."

"Quite as many as that; but you cannot surely forget that there can be only one winner."

"No doubt. But who will that be? Can you tell?" said Madame, in despair.

"You remind me that I had a dream last night; my dreams are always good, — I sleep so little."

"What was your dream? — But are you suffering?"

"No," said the queen, stifling with wonderful command the torture of a renewed attack of shooting pains in her bosom; "I dreamed that the king won the bracelets."

"The king?"

"You are going to ask me, I think, what the king could possibly do with the bracelets?"

"Yes."

"And you would not add, perhaps, that it would be very fortunate if the king were really to win, for he would be obliged to give the bracelets to some one else."

"To restore them to you, for instance."

"In which case I should immediately give them away; for you do not think," said the queen, laughing, "that I have put these bracelets up for lottery from necessity.

My object was to give them without arousing any one's jealousy; but if Fortune should not get me out of my difficulty — well, I would teach Fortune a lesson, and I know very well to whom I would offer the bracelets." These words were accompanied by so expressive a smile that Madame could not resist paying her by a grateful kiss.

"But," added Anne of Austria, "do you not know as well as I do, that if the king were to win the bracelets, he would not restore them to me?"

"You mean he would give them to the queen?"

"No, and for the very same reason that he would not give them back again to me; since, if I had wished to make the queen a present of them, I had no need of him for that purpose."

Madame cast a side-glance upon the bracelets, which in their casket were dazzlingly exposed to view upon a table close beside her.

"How beautiful they are!" she said, sighing. "But stay!" Madame continued; "we are quite forgetting that your Majesty's dream is nothing but a dream."

"I should be very much surprised," returned Anne of Austria, "if my dream were to deceive me; that has happened to me very seldom."

"We may look upon you as a prophetess, then."

"I have already said, my daughter, that I dream but very rarely; but the coincidence of my dream about this matter with my own ideas is extraordinary, — it agrees so wonderfully with my own views and arrangements."

"What arrangements do you allude to?"

"That you will win the bracelets, for instance."

"In that case it will not be the king."

"Oh," said Anne of Austria, "there is not such a very great distance between his Majesty's heart and your own; for are you not his beloved sister? There is not, I repeat,

so very wide a distance that my dream can be pronounced false. Come, let us reckon up the chances in your favor."

"I will count them."

"In the first place, we will begin with the dream. If the king wins, he is sure to give you the bracelets."

"I admit that is one."

"If you win them, they are yours."

"Naturally! that may be admitted also."

"Lastly, — if Monsieur were to win them!"

"Oh!" said Madame, laughing heartily, "he would give them to the Chevalier de Lorraine."

Anne of Austria laughed as heartily as her daughter-in-law; so freely, indeed, that her sufferings again returned, and made her turn suddenly pale at the very height of her mirth.

"What is the matter?" inquired Madame, alarmed.

"Nothing, nothing, — a pain in my side. I have been laughing too much. We were at the fourth chance, I think."

"Oh, that I cannot see!"

"I beg your pardon. I am not excluded from the chance of winning; and if I be the winner, you are sure of me."

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" exclaimed Madame.

"I hope you look upon yourself as one whose chances are good, and that my dream now begins to assume the solid form of reality."

"Yes, indeed, you give me both hope and confidence," said Madame; "and the bracelets won in this manner will be a hundred times more precious to me.'

"Well, then, good-by until this evening;" and the princesses separated.

Anne of Austria, after her daughter-in-law had left her,

said to herself, as she examined the bracelets, "They are indeed precious, since by their means this evening I shall have won over a heart to my side, and at the same time shall have penetrated a secret." Then, turning towards the deserted alcove in her room, she said, addressing vacancy, "Is it not thus that you would have acted, my poor Chevreuse? Yes, yes; I know it is."

And, like a perfume of days gone by, her youth, her playful imagination, and her happiness seemed to return to her with the echo of this invocation.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LOTTERY.

At eight o'clock in the evening, every one had assembled in the queen-mother's apartments. Anne of Austria, in full dress, beautiful still, with the remains of her former loveliness, and aided by all the resources which coquetry can command at the hands of clever assistants, concealed, or rather pretended to conceal, from the crowd of young courtiers who surrounded her, and who still admired her, — thanks to the combination of circumstances which we have indicated in the preceding chapter, — the ravages, which were already visible, of the acute suffering to which she finally succumbed a few years later. Madame, almost as great a coquette as Anne of Austria, and the queen, simple and natural as usual, were seated beside her, each contending for her good graces.

The ladies of honor, united in a body in order to resist with greater effect and consequently with more success the witty and lively conversations which the young men held with them, were enabled, like a battalion formed in square, to offer one another mutual aid in attack and defence. Montalais, skilled in that skirmishing warfare, protected the whole line by the rolling fire which she directed against the enemy. De Saint-Aignan, in utter despair at the rigor of Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, which became insolent in its obstinacy, tried to turn his back upon her; but overcome by the irresistible brilliancy of the

beauty's great eyes, he every moment returned to confirm his defeat by new submissions, to which Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente did not fail to reply by fresh acts of impertinence. De Saint-Aignan did not know to what patron saint to appeal. La Vallière had about her not exactly a court, but a small nucleus of courtiers. De Saint-Aignan, hoping by this manœuvre to attract Athenais's attention towards him, had approached the young girl, and saluted her with a respect which induced some slow-going persons to believe that he wished to console himself for Athenais by Louise. These, however, were persons who had neither been witnesses of the scene during the shower, nor had heard it spoken of. But as the majority were already informed, and well informed too on the matter, the acknowledged favor with which she was regarded had attracted to her side some of the most astute as well as the least sensible members of the court, — the former, because they said with Montaigne, "What do I know?" and the latter, because they said with Rabelais, "It is likely." The greatest number had followed in the wake of the latter, just as in hunting five or six of the best hounds alone follow the scent of the animal hunted, while the remainder of the pack follow only the scent of the hounds.

The two princesses and the queen examined with particular attention the toilets of their ladies and maids of honor as well as those of the other women; and they condescended to forget that they were queens in recollecting that they were women. In other words, they pitilessly tore in pieces every petticoat-wearer there, as Molière would have said. The looks of both princesses simultaneously fell upon La Vallière, who, as we have just said, was completely surrounded at that moment. Madame knew not what pity was, and said to the queen-mother, bending towards her,

"Indeed, if Fortune were just, she would favor that poor little La Vallière."

"That is not possible," said the queen-mother, smiling.

"Why not?"

"There are only two hundred tickets, so that it was not possible to inscribe every one's name on the list."

"And hers is not there, then?"

"No!"

"What a pity! She might have won them, and then sold them."

"Sold them!" exclaimed the queen.

"Yes; it would have been a dowry for her, and she would not have been obliged to marry without her *trousseau*, as will probably be the case."

"Really?" answered the queen-mother. "Poor little thing! has she no dresses, then?" and she pronounced these words like a woman who has never been able to understand the inconveniences of a slenderly filled purse.

"Stay, look at her! Heaven forgive me, if she is not wearing the very same skirt this evening that she had on this morning during the drive, and which she managed to keep clean, thanks to the care the king took of her in sheltering her from the rain."

At the very moment Madame uttered these words the king entered the room. The two princesses would not perhaps have observed his arrival, so completely were they occupied in their ill-natured remarks, had not Madame noticed that all at once La Vallière, who was standing up facing the gallery, exhibited certain signs of confusion, and then said a few words to the courtiers who surrounded her, who immediately dispersed. This movement induced Madame to look towards the door, and at that moment the captain of the Guards announced the king. At this

announcement La Vallière, who had hitherto kept her eyes fixed upon the gallery, suddenly cast them down as the king entered

His Majesty was dressed magnificently and in the most perfect taste; he was conversing with Monsieur and the Duc de Roquelaure, — Monsieur on his right and the Duc de Roquelaure on his left. The king advanced in the first place towards the queens, to whom he bowed with an air of graceful respect. He took his mother's hand and kissed it, addressed a few compliments to Madame upon the elegance of her toilet, and then began to make the round of the assembly. La Vallière was saluted in the same manner as the others, with neither more nor less attention. His Majesty then returned to his mother and his wife. When the courtiers noticed that the king had only addressed some ordinary remark to the young girl who had been so particularly noticed in the morning, they immediately drew their own conclusion to account for this coldness of manner, — this conclusion being that although the king might have taken a sudden fancy to her, that fancy had already disappeared. One thing, however, might have been remarked, — that close beside La Vallière, among the number of the courtiers, M. Fouquet was to be seen; and his respectfully attentive manner served to sustain the young girl in the midst of the varied emotions which visibly agitated her.

M. Fouquet was just on the point, moreover, of speaking in a more friendly manner with Mademoiselle de la Vallière, when M. Colbert approached, and after having bowed to Fouquet with all the formality which the rules of the most respectful politeness could require, seemed determined to take his position beside La Vallière for the purpose of entering into conversation with her. Fouquet immediately yielded his place. This proceeding was

eagerly taken in by the eyes of Montalais and Malicorne, who mutually exchanged their several observations on the subject. De Guiche, standing within the embrasure of a window, saw no one but Madame. But as Madame, on her side, frequently glanced at La Vallière, De Guiche's eyes following Madame's were from time to time cast upon the young girl.

La Vallière instinctively felt herself sinking beneath the weight of all the different looks, inspired, some by interest, others by envy. She had nothing to compensate her for her sufferings, — not a kind word from her companions, nor a look of affection from the king. The misery the poor girl was suffering was unspeakable.

The queen-mother now directed the small table to be brought forward, on which the lottery tickets were placed, two hundred in number, and begged Madame de Motteville to read the list of the chosen. It was a matter of course that this list had been drawn up in strict accordance with the laws of etiquette; the king's name was first on the list, next that of the queen-mother, the queen, Monsieur, Madame, and so on. All hearts throbbed anxiously as the list was read aloud; more than three hundred persons had been invited, and each of them was anxious to learn whether his or her name was likely to be found among the number of privileged names. The king listened with as much attention as the others; and when the last name had been pronounced, he saw that La Vallière had been omitted from the list. Every one, of course, could remark this omission. The king flushed as if he had been much annoyed; but La Vallière, gentle and resigned as usual, gave no sign of having noticed it. While the list was being read, the king had not taken his eyes off the young girl, who seemed to expand, as it were, beneath the happy influence which she felt was shed around her, and who was too delighted and

too pure in spirit for any other thought than that of love to find an entrance either to her mind or to her heart. Acknowledging this touching self-denial by the fixedness of his attention, the king showed La Vallière that he appreciated its delicacy. When the list was finished, the faces of the different ladies who had been omitted or forgotten fully expressed their disappointment. Malicorne also was forgotten among the number of men; and the grimace he made plainly said to Montalais, who was also forgotten, "Cannot we contrive to arrange matters with Fortune in such a manner that she shall not forget us?" to which a smile full of intelligence from Mademoiselle Aure, replied, "Certainly we can."

The tickets were distributed to each person according to his or her number. The king received his first, next the queen-mother, then Monsieur, then the queen and Madame, and so on. After this, Anne of Austria opened a small Spanish leather bag, containing two hundred numbers engraved upon small balls of mother-of-pearl, and presented the open sack to the youngest of her maids of honor, that she might take one of the balls out of it. The eager expectation, amid all these tediously slow preparations, was rather that of avidity than of curiosity. De Saint-Aignan bent towards Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente to whisper to her, "Since we have each a number, Mademoiselle, let us unite our two chances. The bracelet shall be yours if I win; and if you are successful, deign to give me but one look of your beautiful eyes."

"No," said Athenais; "if you win the bracelet, keep it, — every one for himself."

"You are without any pity," said De Saint-Aignan, "and I will punish you by a quatrain, —

'Beautiful Iris, to my vows
You are too opposed —'"

"Silence!" said Athenais, "you will prevent me from hearing the winning number."

"Number one," said the young girl who had drawn the mother-of-pearl ball from the Spanish leather bag.

"The king!" exclaimed the queen-mother.

"The king has won!" repeated the queen, delightedly.

"Oh! the king! your dream! said Madame, joyously, in the ear of Anne of Austria.

The king was the only one who did not exhibit any satisfaction. He merely thanked Fortune for what she had done for him, by addressing a slight reverence to the young girl who had been chosen as the proxy of the swift-winged goddess. Then, receiving from the hands of Anne of Austria, amid the envious murmurs of the whole assembly, the casket enclosing the bracelets, he said, "Are these bracelets really beautiful, then?"

"Look at them," said Anne of Austria, "and judge for yourself."

The king looked at them, and said, "Yes, indeed, an admirable medallion. What perfect finish!"

"What perfect finish!" repeated Madame.

Queen Maria Theresa easily saw, and that too at the very first glance, that the king would not offer the bracelets to her; but as he did not seem in the least degree disposed to offer them to Madame, she felt satisfied, or nearly so. The king sat down. The most intimate among the courtiers approached, one by one, to admire more closely the beautiful piece of workmanship, which soon with the king's permission was passed about from hand to hand. Soon every one, connoisseur or not, was uttering various exclamations of surprise, and overwhelming the king with congratulations. There was, in fact, something for every one to admire, — the brilliants for some, and the cutting for others. The ladies visibly displayed

their impatience at seeing such a treasure monopolized by the gentlemen.

"Messieurs, Messieurs," said the king, whom nothing escaped, "one would almost think that you were bracelets as the Sabines used to do; hand them over to the ladies for a little while, who seem to me to have a just claim to understand such matters better than you."

These words appeared to Madame the beginning of a decision which she expected. She gathered, besides, this happy belief from the glances of the queen mother. The courtier who held them at the moment when the king made this remark, amid the general excitement hastened to place the bracelets in the hands of Queen Maria Theresa, who, knowing too well, poor woman, that they were not designed for her, hardly looked at them, and almost immediately passed them on to Madame. The latter — and Monsieur even more minutely than herself — gave the bracelets a long look of covetous desire. Then she handed the jewels to those ladies who were near her, pronouncing this single word, but with an accent which expressed as much as a long phrase, "Magnificent!"

The ladies who had received the bracelets from Madame's hands took as much time as they pleased to examine them, and then made them circulate by passing them on towards the right. During this time the king was tranquilly conversing with De Guiche and Fouquet, — or rather he let them talk, while he did not listen. Accustomed to the set form of ordinary phrases, his ear, like that of all men who exercise an incontestable superiority over others, merely selected from the conversations held about him the indispensable word which requires reply. His attention, however, was now elsewhere, for it wandered as his eyes did.

Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente was the last of the

ladies inscribed for tickets; and as if she had ranked according to her name upon the list, she had only Montalais and La Vallière after her. When the bracelets reached these two persons, no one appeared to take any further notice of them. The humble hands which for a moment touched these jewels deprived them of all their importance, — a circumstance which did not, however, prevent Montalais from starting with joy, envy, and covetous desire at the sight of the beautiful stones still more than at their magnificent workmanship. It is evident that if she were compelled to decide between pecuniary value and artistic beauty, Montalais would unhesitatingly have preferred the diamonds to the cameos; and her disinclination therefore, to pass them to her companion, La Vallière, was very great. La Vallière fixed a look almost of indifference upon the jewels.

"Oh, how rich, how magnificent these bracelets are!" exclaimed Montalais; "and yet you do not go into ecstasies about them, Louise! You are no true woman, I am sure."

"Yes, I am indeed," replied the young girl, with an accent of the most charming melancholy; "but why desire that which cannot be ours?"

The king, his head bent forward, listened to what the young girl was saying. Hardly had the vibration of her voice reached his ear than he rose radiant with delight, and passing across the whole circle, from the place where he stood, to La Vallière, "You are mistaken, Mademoiselle," he said; "you are a woman, and every woman has a right to wear jewels, which are made for woman."

"Oh, Sire!" said La Vallière, "will not your Majesty believe absolutely in my modesty?"

"I believe you possess every virtue, Mademoiselle, — frankness as well as every other; I entreat you, therefore, to say frankly what you think of these bracelets."

"I think that they are beautiful, Sire, and cannot be offered to any other than a queen."

"I am delighted that such is your opinion, Mademoiselle; the bracelets are yours, and the king begs you to accept them."

And as with a movement almost resembling terror La Vallière eagerly held out the casket to the king, the king gently pushed back La Vallière's trembling hand. A silence of astonishment more profound than that of death reigned in the assembly; and yet, from the side where the queens were, no one had heard what he had said, nor understood what he had done. A charitable friend, however, took upon herself to spread the news; it was Tonnay-Charente, to whom Madame had made a sign to approach.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Tonnay-Charente, "how happy that La Vallière is! The king has just given her the bracelets."

Madame bit her lips to such a degree that the blood appeared upon the surface of the skin. The young queen looked first at La Vallière and then at Madame, and began to laugh. Anne of Austria rested her chin upon her beautiful white hand, and remained for a long time absorbed by a suspicion which disturbed her mind and a cruel pain which gnawed her heart. De Guiche, observing Madame turn pale, and guessing the cause of her change of color, abruptly left the assembly and disappeared. Malicorne was then able to approach Montalais very quietly, and under cover of the general din of conversation, said to her, "Aure, you have our fortune and our future close beside you."

"Yes," was her reply, as she tenderly embraced La Vallière, whom inwardly she was tempted to strangle.

CHAPTER VIII.

MALAGA.

During this long and violent contention between the ambitions of the court and the affections of the heart, one of our characters, the least deserving of neglect perhaps, was however very much neglected, very much forgotten, and exceedingly unhappy. In fact, D'Artagnan — D'Artagnan, we say, for we must call him by his name, to remind our readers of his existence — had absolutely nothing whatever to do amid this brilliant, light-hearted world of fashion. After having followed the king during two whole days at Fontainebleau, and having critically observed all the pastoral fancies and heroicomic travesties of his sovereign, the musketeer felt that he needed something more than this to satisfy the cravings of his existence. At every moment assailed by persons who asked him, "How do you think this costume suits me, M. d'Artagnan?" he would reply to them in bland, sarcastic tones, "Why, I think you are quite as well dressed as the finest monkey to be found in the fair at St. Laurent." It was just such a compliment as D'Artagnan usually paid where he did not feel disposed to pay any other; and whether agreeable or not, the inquirer was obliged to be satisfied with it. And whenever any one asked him, "M. d'Artagnan, how do you intend to dress yourself this evening?" he replied, "I shall undress myself," at which all the ladies laughed. But after a couple of days passed in this manner, the musketeer, perceiving

that nothing serious was likely to arise which could concern him, and that the king had completely — or at least appeared to have completely — forgotten Paris, St. Mandé, and Belle-Isle; that M. Colbert's mind was occupied with illuminations and fireworks; that for the next month, at least, the ladies had glances to bestow and receive, — asked the king for leave of absence for a matter of private business. At the moment D'Artagnan made his request, his Majesty was on the point of going to bed, quite exhausted from dancing.

"You wish to leave me, M. d'Artagnan?" inquired the king, with an air of astonishment, for Louis XIV. could never understand that any one who might have the distinguished honor of being near him could wish to be separated from him.

"Sire," said D'Artagnan, "I leave you simply because I am not of the slightest service to you in anything. Ah, if I could only hold the balancing-pole while you were dancing, it would be a very different matter."

"But, my dear M. d'Artagnan," said the king, gravely, "people dance without a balancing-pole."

"Ah, indeed!" said the musketeer, maintaining his imperceptible tone of irony, "I had no idea at all of that."

"You have not seen me dance, then?" inquired the king.

"Yes; but I believed it would give place to matters requiring greater force. I was mistaken, — a greater reason, therefore, why I should withdraw. Sire, I repeat, you have no present occasion for my services; besides, if your Majesty should have any need of me, you would know where to find me."

"Very well," said the king; and he granted him his leave of absence.

We shall not look for D'Artagnan, therefore, at Fon-

tainebleau, for this would be quite useless; but with the permission of our readers we shall find him in the Rue des Lombards, at the sign of the Pilon d'Or, in the house of our old friend Planchet. It was about eight o'clock in the evening, and the weather was exceedingly warm; there was only one window open, and that one belonging to a room on the *entresol*. A perfume of spices, mingled with another perfume less exotic but more penetrating, — namely, that which arose from the street, — ascended to the nostrils of the musketeer.

D'Artagnan, reclining upon an immense flat-backed chair, with his legs not stretched out, but simply placed upon a stool, formed the most obtuse angle that was ever seen. Both his arms were crossed over his head, his head reclining upon his left shoulder, in the manner of Alexander the Great. His eyes, usually so quick and intelligent in their expression, were now half closed, and were fixed upon a small corner of blue sky which was visible behind the opening of the chimneys; there was just enough blue to use if it were necessary to set a piece into one of the sacks of lentils, or beans, which formed the principal furniture of the shop on the ground floor. Thus extended at his ease, and thus sheltered in his place of observation behind the window, D'Artagnan seemed no longer a soldier, no longer an officer of the palace, but a citizen in a state of stagnation between his dinner and supper, or between his supper and his bed, — with one of those strong, ossified brains, which have no more room for a single idea, so fiercely does animal matter keep watch at the doors of intelligence, narrowly inspecting the contraband trade which might result from the introduction into the brain of a symptom of thought.

We have already said that night was closing in; the shops were being lighted, while the windows of the upper

apartments were being closed, and the irregular steps of a patrol of soldiers forming the night-watch could be heard in the distance. D'Artagnan continued to think of nothing, and to look at nothing except the blue corner of the sky. A few paces from him completely in the shade, lying on his stomach upon a sack of Indian corn, was Planchet, with both his arms under his chin, and his eyes fixed on D'Artagnan, who was either thinking, dreaming, or sleeping with his eyes open. Planchet had been watching him for a tolerably long time, and by way of interruption, began by exclaiming, "Hum! hum!" But D'Artagnan did not stir. Planchet then saw that it was necessary to have recourse to some more effectual means. After mature deliberation, the most ingenious means which suggested itself to him in the present circumstances was to let himself roll off the sack to the floor, murmuring at the same time against himself the word "Stupid" But whatever was the noise produced by Planchet's fall, D'Artagnan, who had in the course of his existence heard many other noises, did not appear to pay the least attention to it. Besides, an enormous cart laden with stones, passing from the Rue St. Médéric, overcame by the noise of its wheels the noise of Planchet's fall. And yet Planchet fancied that, in token of tacit approval, he saw the musketeer imperceptibly smile at the word "Stupid." This emboldened him to say, "Are you asleep, M. d'Artagnan?"

"No, Planchet, I am not even asleep," replied the musketeer.

"I am in despair," said Planchet, "to hear such a word as *even*."

"Well, and why not? Is it not a good word, M. Planchet?"

"Of course, M. d'Artagnan."

"Well?"

"Well, then, the word distresses me beyond measure."

"Tell me why you are distressed, Planchet," said D'Artagnan.

"If you say that you are not *even* asleep, it is as much as to say that you have not even the consolation of being able to sleep; or better still, it is precisely the same as telling me that you are bored to death."

"Planchet, you know I am never bored."

"Except to-day and the day before yesterday."

"Bah!"

"M. d'Artagnan, it is a week since you returned from Fontainebleau; it is a week since you had any orders to issue, or your men to review and manœuvre. You need the sound of guns, drums, and all that royal din and confusion; I, who have myself carried a musket, can easily believe that."

"Planchet," replied D'Artagnan, "I assure you that I am not bored the least in the world."

"In that case what are you doing, lying there as if you were dead?"

"My dear Planchet, there was once upon a time, at the siege of La Rochelle, when I was there, when you were there, when we both were there, a certain Arab, who was celebrated for his skill in aiming culverins. He was a clever fellow, although very singular with regard to his complexion, which was of the same color as your olives. Well, this Arab, whenever he had done eating or working, used to sit down to rest himself, as I am resting now, and smoked I cannot tell you what sort of magical leaves through a long amber-mouthed tube; and if any officer happening to pass reproached him for being always asleep, he used quietly to reply, 'Better to sit down than to stand up, to lie down than to sit down, to be dead than to lie down.'"

"He was a very melancholy Arab, both from his color and from his style of conversation," said Planchet. "I remember him perfectly well. He used to cut off the heads of the Protestants with extreme satisfaction."

"Precisely; and then used to embalm them, when they were worth the trouble."

"Yes; and when he was engaged in his embalming occupations, with his herbs and other plants about him, he looked like a basket-maker making baskets."

"You are quite right, Planchet; he did so."

"Oh, I can remember things too"

"I have no doubt of it; but what do you think of his mode of reasoning?"

"I think it very good in one sense, Monsieur, but very stupid in another."

"Explain, Planchet, explain."

"Well, Monsieur, in point of fact, then, 'Better to sit down than to stand up,' is plain enough, especially when one may be fatigued under certain circumstances;" and Planchet smiled in a roguish way. "As for 'Better to be lying down than sitting down,' let that pass; but as for the last proposition, that it is 'better to be dead than lying down,' it is, in my opinion, very absurd, my own undoubted preference being for my bed; and if you are not of my opinion, it is simply, as I have already had the honor of telling you, because you are boring yourself to death."

"Planchet, do you know M. La Fontaine?"

"The chemist at the corner of the Rue St. Médéric?"

"No; the writer of fables?"

"Oh! Maître Corbeau!"

"Exactly so; well, then, I am like his hare."

"He has a hare also, then?"

"He has all sorts of animals."

"Well, what does his hare do, then?"

"His hare thinks."

"Ah, ah!"

"Planchet, I am like M. La Fontaine's hare, — I am thinking."

"You 're thinking, you say?" said Planchet, uneasily.

"Yes; your house is dull enough to drive people to think. You will admit that, I hope."

"And yet, Monsieur, you have a look-out upon the street."

"Yes; and wonderfully interesting that is, of course."

"But it is no less true, Monsieur, that if you were living at the back of the house you would be bored — I mean you would think — more than ever."

"Upon my word, Planchet, I hardly know that."

"Still," said the grocer, "if your reflections were at all like those which led you to restore King Charles II.;" and Planchet finished by a little laugh which was not without its meaning.

"Ah, Planchet, my friend," returned D'Artagnan, "you are getting ambitious."

"Is there no other king to be restored, M. d'Artagnan, — no other Monk to be put into a box?"

"No, my dear Planchet; all the kings are seated on their thrones, — less comfortably so, perhaps, than I am upon this chair; but, at all events, there they are;" and D'Artagnan sighed.

"M. d'Artagnan," said Planchet, "you are making me very uneasy."

"You 're very good, Planchet."

"I have a suspicion, Heaven forgive me!"

"What is it?"

"M. d'Artagnan, you are getting thin."

"Oh!" said D'Artagnan, striking his chest, which sounded like an empty cuirass, "it is impossible, Planchet."

"Ah!" said Planchet, with effusion, "if you were to get thin in my house —"

"Well?"

"I should do something rash."

"What would you do? Tell me."

"I should look out for the man who was the cause of all your anxieties."

"Ah! according to your account, I am anxious now."

"Yes, you are anxious, and you are getting thin, visibly getting thin. *Malaga!* if you go on getting thin in this way, I will take my sword in my hand, and go straight to M. d'Herblay and have it out with him."

"What!" said M. d'Artagnan, starting in his chair, — "what's that you say, Planchet? And what has M. d'Herblay's name to do with your groceries?"

"Just as you please. Get angry if you like, or call me names if you like, but, *morbleu!* I know what I know."

D'Artagnan had, during this second outburst of Planchet, so placed himself as not to lose a single look of his face; that is, he sat with both his hands resting on his knees, and his head stretched towards the worthy grocer. "Come, explain yourself," he said, "and tell me how you could possibly utter such a blasphemy. M. d'Herblay, your old master, my friend, an ecclesiastic, a musketeer turned bishop, — would you raise your sword against him, Planchet?"

"I could raise my sword against my own father when I see you in such a state as you are now."

"M. d'Herblay, a gentleman!"

"It's all the same to me whether he's a gentleman or not. He gives you the blue devils, that is all I know; and the blue devils make people get thin. *Malaga!* I have no notion of M. d'Artagnan leaving my house thinner than he entered it."

"How does he give me the blue devils, as you call it? Come, explain, explain!"

"You have had the nightmare during the last three nights."

"I?"

"Yes, you; and in your nightmare you called out, several times, 'Aramis! sly Aramis!'"

"Ah! I said that, did I?" murmured D'Artagnan, uneasily.

"Yes, those very words, upon my honor."

"Well, what else? You know the saying, my friend, 'Dreams go by contraries.'"

"Not so; for every time during the last three days when you went out, you have not once failed to ask me on your return, 'Have you seen M. d'Herblay?' or else, 'Have you received any letters for me from M. d'Herblay?'"

"Well, it is very natural that I should take an interest in my old friend," said D'Artagnan.

"Of course; but not to such an extent as to get thin from it."

"Planchet, I'll get fatter; I give you my word of honor I will."

"Very well, Monsieur, I accept it; for I know that when you give your word of honor it is sacred."

"I will not dream of Aramis any longer, and I will never ask you again if there are any letters from M. d'Herblay; but on condition that you explain one thing to me."

"Tell me what it is, Monsieur."

"I am a great observer; and just now you made use of a very singular oath, which is unusual for you."

"You mean *Malaga!* I suppose?"

"Precisely."

"It is the oath I have used ever since I have been a grocer."

"Very proper, too; it is the name of a dried grape or raisin, I believe?"

"It is my most ferocious oath; when I have once said *Malaga!* I am a man no longer."

"Still, I never knew you to use that oath before."

"Very likely not, Monsieur. Some one gave it to me," said Planchet; and as he pronounced these words, he winked his eye with a cunning expression, which thoroughly awakened D'Artagnan's attention.

"Come, come, M. Planchet!"

"Why, I am not like you, Monsieur," said Planchet. "I don't pass my life in thinking."

"You are wrong, then."

"I mean in boring myself to death. We have but a very short time to live, — why not make the best of it?"

"You are an Epicurean philosopher, I begin to think, Planchet."

"Why not? My hand is still as steady as ever; I can write, and can weigh out my sugar and spices; my foot is firm; I can dance and walk about; my stomach has its teeth still, for I eat and digest well; my heart is not quite hardened. Well, Monsieur — "

"Well, what, Planchet?"

"Why, you see — " said the grocer, rubbing his hands together.

D'Artagnan crossed one leg over the other, and said, "Planchet, my friend, you overwhelm me with surprise!"

"How so?"

"You are revealing yourself to me in a character absolutely new."

Planchet, flattered in the highest degree by this remark, continued to rub his hands very hard together. "Ah!"

he said, "because I happen to be only stupid, you think me, perhaps, a positive fool."

"Very good, Planchet; very well reasoned."

"Follow my idea, Monsieur, if you please. I said to myself," continued Planchet, "that without enjoyment there is no happiness on this earth."

"Quite true, — what you say, Planchet," interrupted D'Artagnan.

"At all events, if we cannot obtain pleasure, — for pleasure is not so common a thing, after all, — let us at least get consolation of some kind or other."

"And so you console yourself?"

"Exactly so."

"Explain to me your method of consoling yourself."

"I put on a buckler to fight against ennui. I rule my time by patience; and on the very evening before the day on which I perceive that I am going to get bored, I amuse myself."

"Is it no more difficult than that?"

"No."

"And you found it out quite by yourself?"

"Quite so."

"It is miraculous."

"What do you say?"

"I say, that your philosophy is not to be matched in the whole world."

"You think so? Follow my example, then."

"It is a very tempting one."

"Do as I do."

"I could not wish for anything better. But all minds are not of the same stamp; and it might possibly happen that if I were required to amuse myself in the manner you do, I should bore myself horribly."

"Bah! at least try it first."

"Well, tell me what you do."

"Have you observed that I leave home occasionally?"

"Yes."

"In any particular way?"

"Periodically."

"That's the very thing. You have noticed it, then?"

"My dear Planchet, you must understand that when two persons see each other nearly every day, and one of the two absents himself, the other misses him. Do not you feel the want of my society when I am in the country?"

"Prodigiously; that is to say, I feel like a body without a soul."

"That being understood, then, let us go on."

"What are the periods when I absent myself?"

"On the 15th and 30th of every month."

"And I remain away — "

"Sometimes two, sometimes three, and sometimes four days at a time."

"Have you ever given it a thought, what I have been absent for?"

"To look after your debts, I suppose."

"And when I returned, how did you think I looked?"

"Exceedingly satisfied."

"You admit, you see, that I always look very satisfied. And to what have you attributed my satisfaction?"

"To the fact that your business was going on very well; that your purchases of rice, prunes, brown sugar, dried apples and pears, and treacle were advantageous. You were always very picturesque in your notions and ideas, Planchet; and I was not in the slightest degree surprised to find that you had selected the grocer's trade as an occupation, which is of all trades the most varied and the very pleasantest in kind, since one handles in it so many natural and perfumed productions."

"Perfectly true, Monsieur; but you are very greatly mistaken."

"In what way?"

"In thinking that I go away like that, Monsieur, every fortnight to collect my money or to make purchases. Oh! how the deuce could you have thought such a thing? Oh! oh! oh!" and Planchet began to laugh in a manner that inspired D'Artagnan with very serious misgivings as to his sanity.

"I confess," said the musketeer, "that I do not precisely catch your meaning."

"Very true, Monsieur."

"What do you mean by 'very true'?"

"It must be true, since you say it; but pray be assured that it in no way lessens my opinion of you."

"Ah! that is very fortunate."

"No. You are a man of genius; and whenever the question happens to be of war, tactics, surprises, or good honest blows to be dealt, why, kings are rubbish compared to you. But for the consolations of the mind, the proper care of the body, the agreeable things of life, if one may say so — ah, Monsieur, don't talk to me about men of genius; they are their own executioners."

"Good, Planchet!" said D'Artagnan, quite fidgety with curiosity; "upon my word, you interest me in the highest degree."

"You feel already less bored than you did just now, do you not?"

"I was not bored; yet since you have been talking to me I feel more amused."

"Very good, then; that is not a bad beginning. I will cure you, rely upon that."

"I ask nothing better."

"Will you let me try, then?"

"Immediately, if you like."

"Very well. Have you any horses here?"

"Yes; ten, twenty, thirty."

"Oh, there is no occasion for so many as that; two will be quite sufficient."

"They are at your disposal, Planchet."

"Very good; then I shall carry you off with me."

"When?"

"To-morrow."

"Where?"

"Ah! you are asking me too much."

"You will admit, however, that it is important that I should know where I am going."

"Do you like the country?"

"Only moderately, Planchet."

"Then you like the town better?"

"That is as it may be."

"Well, I am going to take you to a place half town and half country."

"Good."

"To a place where I am sure you will amuse yourself."

"Admirable!"

"Yes; and more wonderful still, to a place from which you have just returned, for the purpose only, it would seem, of getting bored here."

"It is to Fontainebleau you are going, then?"

"Exactly; to Fontainebleau."

"And, in Heaven's name, what are you going to do at Fontainebleau?"

Planchet answered D'Artagnan by a wink full of sly humor.

"You have some property there, you rascal!"

"Oh, a very paltry affair; a little bit of a house,—nothing more!"

"I understand you."

"But it is tolerable enough, I give you my word for it."

"I am going to Planchet's country-seat!" exclaimed D'Artagnan.

"Whenever you like."

"Did we not say to-morrow?"

"To-morrow, if you like; and then, besides, to-morrow is the 14th, — that is to say, the day before the one when I am afraid of getting bored; so we will look upon it as an understood thing."

"Agreed."

"You will lend me one of your horses?"

"The best I have."

"No; I prefer the gentlest. I never was a very good rider, as you know, and in my grocery business I have got more awkward than ever; besides —"

"Besides what?"

"Why," added Planchet, with another wink, "I do not wish to fatigue myself."

"Why so?" D'Artagnan ventured to ask.

"Because I should lose half the pleasure I expect to enjoy," replied Planchet; and thereupon he rose from his sack of Indian corn, stretching himself, and making all his bones crack, one after the other, with a sort of harmony.

"Planchet, Planchet," exclaimed D'Artagnan, "I do declare that there is no sybarite, upon the whole face of the globe, who can be compared to you. Ah, Planchet, it is very clear that we have never yet eaten a ton of salt together."

"Why so, Monsieur?"

"Because even now I can scarcely say I know you," said D'Artagnan, "and because, in point of fact, I return to the opinion which for a moment I had formed of you

on that day at Boulogne when you strangled, or nearly strangled, M. de Wardes's valet, Lubin, — in plain language, Planchet, that you are a man of great resources."

Planchet began to laugh with a laugh full of self-conceit; bade the musketeer good night, and went downstairs to his back shop which he used as a bedroom. D'Artagnan resumed his original position upon his chair; and his brow, which had been unruffled for a moment, became more thoughtful than ever. He had already forgotten the whims and fancies of Planchet. "Yes," said he, taking up again the thread of his thoughts, which had been broken by the agreeable conversation in which we have just permitted our readers to participate, — "Yes, yes, those three points include everything: First, to ascertain what Baisemeaux wanted with Aramis; secondly, to learn why Aramis does not let me hear from him; and thirdly, to ascertain where Porthos is. The whole mystery lies in these three points. Since, therefore," continued D'Artagnan, "our friends tell us nothing, we must have recourse to our own poor intelligence. I must do what I can, *mordioux!* or rather *Malaga!* as Planchet says."

CHAPTER IX.

A LETTER FROM M. DE BAISEMEAUX.

D'ARTAGNAN, faithful to his plan, went the very next morning to pay a visit to M. de Baisemeaux. It was cleaning day at the Bastille; the cannon were furbished up, the staircases scraped and cleaned; and the jailers seemed to be carefully engaged in polishing even the keys themselves. As for the soldiers belonging to the garrison, they were walking about in the different courtyards, under the pretence that they were clean enough.

The governor, Baisemeaux, received D'Artagnan with more than ordinary politeness, but he behaved towards him with so marked a reserve of manner that all D'Artagnan's tact and cleverness could not get a syllable out of him. The more he kept himself within bounds, the more D'Artagnan's suspicion increased. The latter even fancied that he noticed that the governor was acting under the influence of a recent recommendation. Baisemeaux had not been at the Palais-Royal with D'Artagnan the same cold and impenetrable man which the latter now found in the Baisemeaux of the Bastille. When D'Artagnan wished to make him talk about the urgent money matters which had brought Baisemeaux in search of Aramis, and had rendered him expansive, notwithstanding what had passed on that evening, Baisemeaux pretended that he had some orders to give in the prison, and left D'Artagnan so long alone, waiting for him, that our musketeer, feeling sure that he should not get another syllable out of him, left

the Bastille without waiting until Baisemeaux returned from his inspection.

But D'Artagnan's suspicions were aroused; and when once that was the case, D'Artagnan could not sleep or remain quiet for a moment. He was among men what the cat is among quadrupeds, the emblem of restlessness and impatience at the same moment. A restless cat no more remains in the same place than a silk thread does which is wafted idly to and fro with every breath of air. A cat on the watch is as motionless as death, fixed at its place of observation, and neither hunger nor thirst can draw it away from its meditation. D'Artagnan, who was burning with impatience, suddenly threw aside the feeling, like a cloak which he felt too heavy on his shoulders, and said to himself that what they were concealing from him was the very thing it was important that he should know; and consequently he reasoned that Baisemeaux would not fail to put Aramis on his guard, if Aramis had given him any particular recommendation, — which was, in fact, the very thing that happened.

Baisemeaux had hardly had time to return from the donjon, when D'Artagnan placed himself in ambuscade close to the Rue du Petit-Muse, so as to see every one who might leave the gates of the Bastille. After he had spent an hour on the look-out from the Golden Portcullis, under the pent-house of which he could keep himself somewhat in the shade, D'Artagnan observed a soldier leave the Bastille. This was, indeed, the surest indication he could possibly have wished for, as every jailer or warder has certain days, and even certain hours, for leaving the Bastille, since all are alike prohibited from having either wives or lodgings in the castle, and can accordingly leave without exciting any curiosity; but a soldier once in barracks is kept there for four-and-twenty hours when

on duty, — and no one knew this better than D'Artagnan. The soldier in question, therefore, was not likely to leave in his regimentals, except on an express and urgent order. The soldier, we were saying, left the Bastille at a slow and lounging pace, like a happy mortal, in fact, who instead of sentry duty before a wearisome guard-house or upon a bastion no less wearisome has the good luck to get a little liberty in addition to a walk, — the two pleasures being reckoned as part of his time on duty. He bent his steps towards the Faubourg St. Antoine, enjoying the fresh air and the warmth of the sun, and looking at all the pretty faces he passed. D'Artagnan followed him at a distance; he had not yet arranged his ideas as to what was to be done. "I must, first of all," he thought, "see the fellow's face. A man seen is a man judged of." D'Artagnan increased his pace, and, which was not very difficult, soon got in advance of the soldier. Not only did he observe that his face showed a tolerable amount of intelligence and resolution, but he noticed also that his nose was a little red. "The fellow has a weakness for brandy, I see," said D'Artagnan to himself. At the same moment that he remarked his red nose, he saw that the soldier had a white paper in his belt.

"Good! he has a letter," added D'Artagnan. The only difficulty was to get hold of the letter. A soldier would of course be too delighted at having been selected by M. de Baisemeaux as a special messenger, and would not be likely to sell his message. As D'Artagnan was biting his nails, the soldier continued to advance farther and farther into the Faubourg St. Antoine. "He is certainly going to St. Mandé," he said to himself, "and I shall not be able to learn what the letter contains." It was enough to drive him wild. "If I were in uniform," said D'Artagnan to himself, "I would have the fellow seized and his letter

with him. I could easily get assistance at the very first guard-house; but the devil take me if I mention my name in an affair of this kind! If I were to treat him to something to drink, his suspicions would be roused; and besides he would make me drunk *Mordioux!* my wits seem to have left me," said D'Artagnan; "it is all over with me. Yet, supposing I were to attack this poor devil, make him draw his sword, and kill him for the sake of his letter! No harm in that, if it were a question of a letter from a queen to a nobleman, or a letter from a cardinal to a queen; but what miserable intrigues are those of Messieurs Aramis and Fouquet with M. Colbert! A man's life for that! Oh, no, indeed; not even ten crowns."

As D'Artagnan philosophized in this manner, biting first his nails and then his mustaches, he perceived a group of archers and a commissary of police engaged in forcibly carrying away a man of very gentlemanly exterior, who was struggling with all his might against them. The archers had torn his clothes, and were dragging him roughly away. He begged that they would lead him along more respectfully, asserting that he was a gentleman and a soldier; and observing our soldier walking in the street, he called out, "Help, comrade!"

The soldier walked on with the same step towards the man who had called out to him, followed by the crowd. An idea suddenly occurred to D'Artagnan; it was his first one, and we shall find that it was not a bad one, either. During the time the gentleman was relating to the soldier that he had just been seized in a house as a thief, when the truth was he was only there as a lover; and while the soldier was pitying him, and offering him consolation and advice with that gravity which a French soldier has always ready whenever his vanity or his *esprit de corps* is con-

cerned, — D'Artagnan glided behind the soldier, who was closely hemmed in by the crowd, and quickly and deftly drew the paper out of his belt. As at this moment the gentleman with the torn clothes was pulling about the soldier to show how the commissary of police had pulled him about, D'Artagnan effected his capture of the letter without the slightest inconvenience. He stationed himself about ten paces distant, behind the pillar of an adjoining house, and read the address, "To M. du Vallon, at M. Fouquet's, St. Mandé."

"Good!" he said; and then he unsealed without tearing the letter, drew out the paper, which was folded in four, and which contained only these words: —

DEAR M. DU VALLON, — Will you be good enough to tell M. d'Herblay that *he* has been to the Bastille, and has been asking questions?

Your devoted DE BAISEMEAUX.

"Very good! all right!" exclaimed D'Artagnan; "it is clear enough now. Porthos is engaged in it." Being now satisfied of what he wished to know: "*Mordioux!*" thought the musketeer, "there is that poor devil of a soldier, whom that hot-headed, cunning fellow, De Baisemeaux, will make to pay dearly for my trick. If he returns without the letter, what will they do to him? Besides, I don't want the letter; when the egg has been sucked, what is the good of the shell?" D'Artagnan perceived that the commissary and the archers had succeeded in convincing the soldier, and had gone on their way with the prisoner, the latter being still surrounded by the crowd and continuing his complaints. D'Artagnan advanced into the very middle of the crowd, let the letter fall, without any one having observed him, and then retreated rapidly. The soldier resumed his route towards

St. Mandé, his mind much occupied with the gentleman who had implored his protection. Suddenly he thought of his letter, and looking at his belt saw that it was no longer there. D'Artagnan derived no little satisfaction from his sudden terrified cry. The poor soldier in the greatest anguish of mind looked round him on every side, and at last, about twenty paces behind him, perceived the blessed envelope. He pounced on it like a falcon on its prey. The envelope was certainly a little dusty and rather crumpled, but at all events the letter was found again. D'Artagnan observed that the broken seal puzzled the soldier a good deal; but he apparently satisfied himself, and returned the letter to his belt. "Go on," said D'Artagnan, "I have plenty of time before me, so you may precede me. It appears that Aramis is not at Paris, since Baisemeaux writes to Porthos. Dear Porthos, how delighted I shall be to see him again, and to have some conversation with him!" said the Gascon; and regulating his pace according to that of the soldier, he promised himself to arrive a quarter of an hour after him at M. Fouquet's.

CHAPTER X.

IN WHICH THE READER WILL BE DELIGHTED TO FIND THAT PORTHOS HAS LOST NOTHING OF HIS STRENGTH.

D'ARTAGNAN had, according to his usual style, calculated that every hour is worth sixty minutes, and every minute worth sixty seconds. Thanks to this perfectly exact calculation of minutes and seconds, he reached the superintendent's door at the very moment when the soldier was leaving it with his belt empty. D'Artagnan presented himself at the door, which a porter with a profusely embroidered livery held half open for him. D'Artagnan would very much have liked to enter without giving his name; but this was impossible, and so he gave it. Notwithstanding this concession, which ought to have removed every difficulty in the way, — at least D'Artagnan thought so, — the doorkeeper hesitated; however, at the second repetition of the title, captain of the king's Musketeers, the doorkeeper, without quite leaving the passage clear for him, ceased to bar it completely. D'Artagnan understood that orders of the most positive character had been given. He decided, therefore, to tell a falsehood, — a circumstance, moreover, which did not very seriously affect his peace of mind, when he saw that beyond the falsehood the safety of the State itself, or even purely and simply his own individual personal interest, might be at stake. He therefore added to the statements which he had already made, that the soldier who had just brought a letter to M. du Vallon was his own messenger, and that the only object of that letter was to announce his intended arrival.

From that moment no one opposed D'Artagnan's entrance any further, and he entered accordingly. A valet wished to accompany him; but he answered that it was useless to take that trouble on his account, inasmuch as he knew perfectly well where M. du Vallon was. There was nothing, of course, to say to a man so thoroughly and completely informed, and D'Artagnan was permitted to do as he liked. The terraces, the magnificent apartments, the gardens, were all reviewed and narrowly inspected by the musketeer. He walked for a quarter of an hour in this more than royal residence, which included as many wonders as articles of furniture, and as many servants as there were columns and doors. "Decidedly," he said to himself, "this mansion has no other limits than the limits of the earth. Is it probable that Porthos has taken it into his head to go back to Pierrefonds without even leaving M. Fouquet's house?" He finally reached a remote part of the château, enclosed by a stone wall upon which climbed a profusion of thick plants, luxuriant in blossoms as large and solid as fruit. At equal distances on the top of this enclosing wall were placed various statues in timid or mysterious attitudes. These were vestals hidden beneath the long Greek peplum, with its thick, heavy folds; agile watchers, covered with their marble veils, and guarding the palace with their furtive glances. A statue of Hermes, with his finger on his lips; one of Iris, with extended wings; another of Night, sprinkled all over with poppies, — ruled over the gardens and the outbuildings, which could be seen through the trees. All these statues threw in white relief their profiles upon the dark ground of the tall cypresses, which shot up their black summits toward the sky. Around these cypresses were entwined climbing roses, whose flowering rings were fastened to every fork of the branches, and spread over the lower

boughs and upon the various statues showers of petals of the richest fragrance.

These enchantments seemed to the musketeer the result of the greatest efforts of the human mind. He felt in a dreamy, almost poetical frame of mind. The idea that Porthos was living in so perfect an Eden gave him a higher idea of Porthos, — showing how true it is that even the very highest orders of minds are not quite exempt from the influence of surrounding circumstances. D'Artagnan found the door, and at the door a kind of spring which he detected; having touched it, the door flew open. D'Artagnan entered, closed the door behind him, and advanced into a pavilion built in a circular form, in which no other sound could be heard but cascades and the songs of birds. At the door of the pavilion he met a lackey.

"It is here, I believe," said D'Artagnan, without hesitation, "that M. le Baron du Vallon is staying?"

"Yes, Monsieur," answered the lackey.

"Have the goodness to tell him that M. le Chevalier d'Artagnan, captain of his Majesty's Musketeers, is waiting to see him."

D'Artagnan was introduced into a parlor, and had not long to remain in expectation. A well-remembered step shook the floor of the adjoining room; a door opened, or rather flew open, and Porthos appeared, and threw himself into his friend's arms with a sort of embarrassment which did not ill become him. "You here?" he exclaimed.

"And you?" replied D'Artagnan. "Ah, you sly fellow!"

"Yes," said Porthos, with a somewhat embarrassed smile; "yes, you see I am staying in M. Fouquet's house, at which you are not a little surprised, I suppose?"

"Not at all; why should you not be one of M.

Fouquet's friends? M. Fouquet has a very large number of friends, particularly among clever men."

Porthos had the modesty not to take the compliment to himself. "Besides," he added, "you saw me at Belle-Isle."

"A greater reason for my believing you to be one of M. Fouquet's friends."

"The fact is, I am acquainted with him," said Porthos, with a certain embarrassment of manner.

"Ah, friend Porthos," said D'Artagnan, "how treacherously you have behaved towards me!"

"In what way?" exclaimed Porthos.

"What! you completed so admirable a work as the fortifications of Belle-Isle, and you did not tell me of it!" Porthos colored. "Nay, more than that," continued D'Artagnan, "you saw me out yonder, you know I am in the king's service, and yet you could not guess that the king, jealously desirous of learning the name of the man whose abilities have wrought a work of which he has heard the most wonderful accounts, — you could not guess, I say, that the king sent me to learn who this man was."

"What! the king sent you to learn —"

"Of course; but don't let us speak of that any more."

"*Corne de bœuf!*" said Porthos; "on the contrary, we will speak of it; and so the king knew that we were fortifying Belle-Isle?"

"Of course; does not the king know everything?"

"But he did not know who was fortifying it."

"No; he only suspected, from what he had been told of the nature of the works, that it was some celebrated soldier."

"The devil!" said Porthos, "if I had only known that!"

"You would not have run away from Vannes as you did, perhaps?"

"No; what did you say when you could n't find me?"

"My dear fellow, I reflected."

"Ah, indeed, you reflected, did you? Well, and to what did that reflection lead?"

"It led me to guess the whole truth."

"Come, then, tell me, what did you guess, after all?" said Porthos, settling himself into an arm-chair and assuming the airs of a sphinx.

"I guessed, in the first place, that you were fortifying Belle-Isle."

"There was no great difficulty in that, for you saw me at work."

"Wait a minute; I also guessed something else, — that you were fortifying Belle-Isle by M. Fouquet's orders."

"That 's true."

"But that is not all. Whenever I feel myself in a mood for guessing, I do not stop half-way; and so I guessed that M. Fouquet wished to preserve the most absolute secrecy respecting these fortifications."

"I believe that was his intention, in fact," said Porthos.

"Yes; but do you know why he wished to keep it secret?"

"Why, in order that it should not be known," said Porthos.

"That was his principal reason. But his wish was subservient to an act of generosity —"

"In fact," said Porthos, "I have heard it said that M. Fouquet was a very generous man."

"— to an act of generosity which he wished to exhibit towards the king."

"Oh, oh!"

"You seem surprised at it?"

"Yes."

"And you did not know that?"

"No."

"Well, I know it, then."

"You're a wizard."

"Not in the slightest degree."

"How do you know it, then?"

"By a very simple means. I heard M. Fouquet himself say so to the king."

"Say what to the king?"

"That he had fortified Belle-Isle on his Majesty's account, and that he made him a present of Belle-Isle."

"And you heard M. Fouquet say that to the king?"

"In those very words. He even added, 'Belle-Isle has been fortified by an engineer, one of my friends, a man of a great deal of merit, whom I shall ask your Majesty's permission to present to you.' 'What is his name?' asked the king. 'The Baron du Vallon,' M. Fouquet replied. 'Very well,' returned his Majesty, 'you will present him to me.'"

"The king said that?"

"Upon the word of a D'Artagnan!"

"Oh!" said Porthos. "Why have I not been presented, then?"

"Have they not, then, spoken to you about this presentation?"

"Yes, certainly; but I am always kept waiting for it."

"Be easy! it will be sure to come."

"Humph! humph!" grumbled Porthos.

D'Artagnan pretended not to hear this; and changing the conversation, he said, "You seem to be living in a very solitary place here, my dear fellow?"

"I always preferred retirement; I am of a melancholy disposition," replied Porthos, with a sigh.

"Really, that is odd," said D'Artagnan; "I never remarked that in you."

"It is only since I have taken to study," said Porthos, with a thoughtful air.

"But the labors of the mind have not affected the health of the body, I trust?"

"Oh, not at all!"

"Your strength is as great as ever?"

"Too great, my friend, too great."

"Ah! I had heard that for a short time after your arrival —"

"That I could hardly move a limb, I suppose?"

"How was it?" said D'Artagnan, smiling; "and why was it you could not move?"

Porthos perceived that he had made a mistake, and wished to correct it. "Yes, I came from Belle-Isle here upon very hard horses," he said; "and that fatigued me."

"I am no longer astonished, then, since I, who followed you, found seven or eight lying dead on the road."

"I am very heavy, you know," said Porthos.

"So that you were bruised all over."

"My fat melted, and that made me very ill."

"Poor Porthos! But how did Aramis act towards you under those circumstances?"

"Very well indeed. He had me attended to by M. Fouquet's own doctor. But just imagine, at the end of a week I could not breathe any longer."

"What do you mean?"

"The room was too small; I absorbed too much air."

"Indeed?"

"I was told so, at least; and so I was removed into another apartment."

"Where you were able to breathe, I hope."

"Yes, more freely; but I had no exercise, — nothing to do. The doctor insisted that I was not to stir; I, on the contrary, felt that I was stronger than ever. That was the cause of a very serious accident."

"What accident?"

"Fancy, my dear fellow, that I revolted against the directions of that ass of a doctor, and I resolved to go out, whether it suited him or not; and consequently I told the valet who waited on me to bring me my clothes."

"You were quite naked, then, my dear Porthos?"

"Oh, no! on the contrary, I had a magnificent dressing-gown to wear. The lackey obeyed. I dressed myself in my own clothes, which had become too large for me; but, what was very strange, my feet had become too large."

"Yes, I quite understand."

"And my boots had become too small."

"You mean your feet were still swollen."

"Exactly; you have hit it."

"*Parbleu!* And is that the accident you were going to tell me about?"

"Oh, yes! I did not come to the same conclusion that you have reached. I said to myself, 'Since my feet have entered my boots ten times, there is no reason why they should not go in the eleventh.'"

"Allow me to tell you, my dear Porthos, that on this occasion you failed in your logic."

"In short, then, I happened to be sitting opposite a partition. I tried to get my right boot on; I pulled it with my hands, I pushed with all the strength of the muscles of my leg, making the most unheard-of efforts, when suddenly the two tags of my boot remained in my hands, and my foot struck out like a catapult."

"Catapult! how learned you are in fortifications, dear Porthos!"

"My foot darted out like a catapult, and came against the partition, which gave way. My friend, I really thought that, like Samson, I had demolished the temple; the number of pictures, the quantity of china, vases of flowers, tapestries, and window-poles which fell down was really wonderful."

"Indeed!"

"Without reckoning that on the other side of a partition was a set of shelves laden with china —"

"Which you knocked over?"

"Which I dashed to the other side of the room," said Porthos, laughing.

"Upon my word it is, as you say, astonishing," replied D'Artagnan, beginning to laugh also; whereupon Porthos laughed louder than ever.

"I broke," said Porthos, in a voice half choked from his increasing mirth, "more than three thousand livres worth of china — ha! ha! ha!"

"Good!" said D'Artagnan.

"I smashed more than four thousand livres worth of glass — ha! ha! ha!"

"Excellent!"

"Without counting a lustre, which fell on my head and was broken into a thousand pieces — ha! ha! ha!"

"Upon your head?" said D'Artagnan, holding his sides.

"Right on the top."

"But your head must have been broken?"

"No, since I tell you, on the contrary, my dear fellow, that it was the lustre which was broken like glass, as it was, indeed."

"Ah! the lustre was glass, you say."

"Venetian glass! a perfect curiosity, quite matchless indeed, and it weighed two hundred pounds."

"And it fell upon your head!"

"Upon — my — head. Just imagine a globe of crystal, gilded all over, the lower part beautifully encrusted, perfumes burning at the top, and jets from which flame issued when they were lighted!"

"I quite understand; but they were not lighted at the time?"

"Happily not, or I should have been set on fire."

"And you were only knocked flat?"

"Not at all."

"How, not at all?"

"Why, the lustre fell on my skull. It appears that we have upon the top of our heads an exceedingly thick crust."

"Who told you that, Porthos?"

"The doctor. A sort of dome which would bear Notre Dame, at Paris."

"Bah!"

"Yes, it seems that our skulls are made in that manner."

"Speak for yourself, my dear fellow! it is your own skull that is made in that manner, and not the skulls of other people."

"Well, that may be so," said Porthos, conceitedly; "so true was it in my case, at least, that no sooner did the lustre fall upon the dome which we have at the top of our heads, than there was a report like a cannon, the crystal was broken to pieces, and I fell, covered from head to foot."

"With blood, poor Porthos!"

"Not at all; with perfumes, which smelt like rich creams. It was delicious; but the odor was too strong, and

I felt quite giddy from it. Perhaps you have experienced it sometimes yourself, D'Artagnan?"

"Yes, in inhaling the scent of the lily of the valley; so that, my poor friend, you were knocked over by the shock and overpowered by the odor?"

"Yes; but what is very remarkable, — for the doctor told me, upon my word, that he had never seen anything like it —"

"You had a bump on your head, at least?" interrupted D'Artagnan.

"I had five."

"Why five?"

"I will tell you; the lustre had, at its lower extremity, five gilt ornaments, extremely sharp."

"Oh!"

"Well, these five ornaments penetrated my hair, which, as you see, I wear very thick."

"Fortunately so."

"And they made a mark on my skin. But just notice the singularity of it, — these things seem really only to happen to me! — instead of making indentations, they made bumps! The doctor could never succeed in explaining that to me satisfactorily."

"Well, then, I will explain it to you."

"You will do me a great service if you will," said Porthos, winking his eyes, which with him was a sign of the profoundest attention.

"Since you have been employing your brain in studies of an exalted character, in important calculations, and so on, the head has gained a certain advantage, so that your head is now too full of science."

"Do you think so?"

"I am sure of it. The result is that instead of allowing any foreign matter to penetrate the interior of the

head, your bony box or skull, which is already too full, avails itself of the openings which are made in it to allow this excess to escape."

"Ah!" said Porthos, to whom this explanation appeared clearer than that of the doctor.

"The five protuberances caused by the five ornaments of the lustre must certainly have been scientific masses, brought to the surface by the force of circumstances."

"In fact," said Porthos, "the real truth is that I felt far worse outside my head than inside. I will even confess that when I put my hat upon my head, clapping it on with that graceful energy which we gentlemen of the sword possess, if my hand was not very gently applied, I experienced the most painful sensations."

"I quite believe you, Porthos."

"Therefore, my good friend," said the giant, "M. Fouquet decided, seeing how slightly built the house was, to give me another lodging; and so they brought me here."

"It is the private park, is it not?"

"Yes."

"Where the rendezvous are made, — that park, indeed, which is so celebrated in some of those mysterious stories about the superintendent."

"I don't know. I have had no rendezvous or mysterious stories here myself; but they have authorized me to exercise my muscles, and I take advantage of the permission by rooting up some of the trees."

"What for?"

"To keep my hand in, and also to get some bird's-nests; I find that more convenient than climbing up the trees."

"You are as pastoral as Tyrcis, my dear Porthos."

"Yes, I like the small eggs; I like them very much

better than larger ones. You have no idea how delicate an omelet is, if made of four or five hundred eggs of linnets, chaffinches, starlings, blackbirds, and thrushes."

"But five hundred eggs is perfectly monstrous!"

"A salad-bowl will hold them easily enough," said Porthos.

D'Artagnan looked at Porthos admiringly for full five minutes, as if he had seen him for the first time, while Porthos proudly expanded beneath his friend's gaze. They remained in this state several minutes, Porthos smiling, and D'Artagnan looking at him. D'Artagnan was evidently seeking to give the conversation a new turn. "Do you amuse yourself much here, Porthos?" he asked at last, very likely after he had found out what he was searching for.

"Not always."

"I can imagine that; but when you get thoroughly bored, by and by, what do you intend to do?"

"Oh! I shall not be here for any length of time. Aramis is waiting until the last bump on my head disappears, in order to present me to the king, who I am told cannot endure the sight of a bump."

"Aramis is still in Paris, then?"

"No."

"Whereabouts is he, then?"

"At Fontainebleau."

"Alone?"

"With M. Fouquet."

"Very good. But do you happen to know one thing?"

"No; tell it me, and then I shall know."

"Well, then, I think that Aramis is forgetting you."

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes; for at Fontainebleau yonder, you must know, they are laughing, dancing, banqueting, and drawing the

corks of M. de Mazarin's wine in fine style. Are you aware that they have a ballet there every evening?"

"The deuce they have "

"I declare that your dear Aramis is forgetting you."

"Well, that is not at all unlikely, and I have myself thought so sometimes."

"Unless he is playing you a trick, the sly fellow!"

"Oh!"

"You know that Aramis is as sly as a fox."

"Yes, but to play me a trick —"

"Listen; in the first place, he puts you under a sort of sequestration."

"He sequesters me! Do you mean to say I am sequestered?"

"I think so."

"I wish you would have the goodness to prove that to me."

"Nothing easier. Do you ever go out?"

"Never"

"Do you ever ride on horseback?"

"Never."

"Are your friends allowed to come and see you?"

"Never."

"Very well, then, my friend; never to go out, never to ride on horseback, never to see your friends, — that is called being sequestered."

"But why should Aramis sequester me?" inquired Porthos.

"Come," said D'Artagnan, "be frank, Porthos!"

"As gold."

"It was Aramis who drew the plan of the fortifications at Belle-Isle, was it not?"

Porthos colored as he said, "Yes; but that was all that he did."

"Exactly; and my own opinion is that it was no very great affair, after all."

"That is mine too."

"Very good; I am delighted that we are of the same opinion."

"He never even came to Belle-Isle," said Porthos.

"There now, you see!"

"It was I who went to Vannes, as you may have seen."

"Say, rather, as I did see. Well, that is precisely the state of the case, my dear Porthos. Aramis, who only drew the plans, wishes to pass himself off as the engineer, while you, who stone by stone built the wall, the citadel, and the bastions, he wishes to reduce to the rank of a mere builder."

"By builder you mean mason, perhaps?"

"Mason; the very word."

"Plasterer, in fact?"

"Precisely."

"A laborer?"

"Exactly."

"Oh, my dear Aramis, you seem to think you are only five-and-twenty years of age still!"

"Yes; and that is not all, for he believes you are fifty."

"I should have liked amazingly to see him at work."

"Yes, indeed."

"A fellow who has got the gout!"

"Yes."

"The gravel!"

"Yes."

"Who has lost three of his teeth!"

"Four."

"While I — look at mine!" and Porthos, opening his large mouth very wide, displayed two rows of teeth rather

less white than snow, but as even, hard, and sound as ivory.

"You can hardly believe, Porthos," said D'Artagnan, "what a fancy the king has for good teeth. Yours decide me; I will present you to the king myself."

"You?"

"Why not? Do you think I have less credit at court than Aramis?"

"Oh, no!"

"Do you think that I have the slightest pretensions in regard to the fortifications at Belle Isle?"

"Oh, certainly not!"

"It is your own interest alone, which would induce me to do it."

"I don't doubt it in the least."

"Well, I am the intimate friend of the king; and a proof of that is that whenever there is anything disagreeable to tell him, it is I who have to do it."

"But, dear friend, if you present me—"

"Well!"

"Aramis will be angry."

"With me?"

"No, with me."

"Bah! whether it be he or I who presents you, since you are to be presented, what does it matter?"

"They were going to get me some clothes made."

"Your own are splendid."

"Oh, those I had ordered were far more beautiful!"

"Take care; the king likes simplicity."

"In that case I will be simple. But what will M. Fouquet say, when he learns that I have left?"

"Are you a prisoner, then, on parole?"

"No, not quite that; but I promised him that I would not leave without letting him know."

"Wait a minute; we shall return to that presently. Have you anything to do here?"

"I? nothing; nothing of any importance, at least."

"Unless, indeed, you are Aramis's representative for something of importance."

"By no means."

"What I tell you, pray understand that, is out of interest for you. I suppose, for instance, that you are commissioned to send Aramis messages and letters."

"Ah! letters — yes, I send certain letters to him."

"Where?"

"To Fontainebleau."

"Have you any letters, then?"

"But —"

"Nay, let me speak. Have you any letters, I say?"

"I have just received one for him."

"Interesting?"

"I suppose so."

"You do not read them, then?"

"I am not at all curious," said Porthos; and he drew out of his pocket the soldier's letter, which Porthos had not read, but which D'Artagnan had.

"Do you know what to do with it?" said D'Artagnan.

"Of course; do as I always do, — send it to him."

"Not so."

"Why not? Keep it, then?"

"No, not quite that. Did they not tell you that this letter was important?"

"Very important."

"Well, you must take it yourself to Fontainebleau."

"To Aramis?"

"Yes."

"Very good."

"And since the king is there —"

"You will profit by that."

"I shall profit by the opportunity to present you to the king."

"Ah, *corne de bœuf!* D'Artagnan, there is no one like you to find expedients."

"Therefore, instead of forwarding to our friend any messages, which may or may not be faithfully delivered, we will ourselves be the bearers of the letter."

"I had never even thought of that, and yet it is simple enough."

"And therefore, because it is urgent, Porthos, we ought to set off at once."

"In fact," said Porthos, "the sooner we set off, the less chance there is of Aramis's letter meeting with any delay."

"Porthos, your reasoning is always forcible, and in your case logic seems to serve as an auxiliary to the imagination."

"Do you think so?" said Porthos.

"It is the result of your hard reading," replied D'Artagnan. "So come along; let us be off!"

"But," said Porthos, "my promise to M. Fouquet?"

"Which?"

"Not to leave St. Mandé without telling him of it."

"Ah, my dear Porthos," said D'Artagnan, "how very young you are!"

"In what way?"

"You are going to Fontainebleau, are you not, where you will find M. Fouquet?"

"Yes."

"Probably in the king's palace."

"'In the king's palace,'" repeated Porthos, with an air full of majesty.

"Well, you will accost him with these words, 'M. Fou-

quet, I have the honor to inform you that I have just left St. Mandé.'"

"And," said Porthos, with the same majestic mien, "seeing me at Fontainebleau at the king's, M. Fouquet will not be able to tell me that I am not speaking the truth."

"My dear Porthos, I was just on the point of opening my lips to make the same remark, but you anticipate me in everything. Oh, Porthos, how fortunately you are gifted! Age has not made any impression on you."

"Not over-much."

"Then there is nothing more to say?"

"I think not."

"All your scruples are removed?"

"Quite so."

"In that case I shall carry you off with me."

"Exactly; and I shall go and get my horses saddled."

"You have horses here, then?"

"I have five."

"You had them sent from Pierrefonds, I suppose?"

"No, M. Fouquet gave them to me."

"My dear Porthos, we shall not want five horses for two persons; besides, I have already three in Paris, which will make eight, and that will be too many."

"It would not be too many if I had my servants here; but, alas! they are not here."

"Do you miss them, then?"

"I miss Mousqueton; I need Mousqueton."

"What a good-hearted fellow you are, Porthos!" said D'Artagnan; "but the best thing you can do is to leave your horses here, as you have left Mousqueton out yonder."

"Why so?"

"Because, by and by, it might turn out a very good thing if M. Fouquet had never given you anything at all."

"I don't understand you," said Porthos.

"It is not necessary that you should understand."

"But yet — "

"I will explain to you later, Porthos."

"I 'll wager it is some piece of policy or other."

"Of the most subtle character," returned D'Artagnan.

Porthos bent his head at this word "policy;" then, after a moment's reflection, he added, "I confess, D'Artagnan, that I am no politician."

"I know that well."

"Oh, every one knows that! You have said it to me yourself, — you the bravest of the brave."

"What did I say to you, Porthos?"

"That every man has his days. You told me so, and I have experienced it myself. There are certain days when one feels less pleasure than on others in exposing one's self to sword-thrusts."

"Exactly my own idea."

"And mine, too, although I can hardly believe in blows or thrusts which kill outright."

"The deuce! yet you have killed a few in your time."

"Yes; but I have never been killed."

"Your reason is a very good one."

"Therefore I do not believe that I shall ever die from a sword-thrust or a gun-shot."

"In that case, then, you are afraid of nothing. Ah! of water perhaps?"

"Oh! I swim like an otter."

"Of a quartan fever, then?"

"I never had one yet, and I don't believe I ever shall; but there is one thing I will admit;" and Porthos lowered his voice.

"What is that?" asked D'Artagnan, adopting the same tone which Porthos had used.

"I must confess," repeated Porthos, "that I am horribly afraid of political matters."

"Oh, bah!" exclaimed D'Artagnan.

"Upon my word, it's true," said Porthos, in a stentorian voice. "I have seen his Eminence M. le Cardinal de Richelieu and his Eminence M. le Cardinal de Mazarin, the one was a red politician, the other a black politician. I have never felt very much more satisfied with the one than with the other. The first struck off the heads of M. de Marillac, M. de Thou, M. de Cinq-Mars, M. de Chalais, M. de Boutteville, and M. de Montmorency; the second got a whole crowd of Frondeurs cut in pieces, — and we belonged to them, my dear fellow."

"On the contrary, we did not belong to them," said D'Artagnan.

"Oh, indeed, yes; for if I unsheathed my sword for the cardinal, I struck for the king."

"Dear Porthos!"

"Well, I have done. My dread of politics is such that if there is any question of politics in the matter, I should much prefer to return to Pierrefonds."

"You would be quite right if that were the case; but with me, dear Porthos, there is no question of politics, that is quite clear. You have labored hard in fortifying Belle-Isle; the king wished to know the name of the clever engineer who had constructed the works. You are modest, as all men of true genius are. Perhaps Aramis wishes to put you under a bushel. But I happen to seize hold of you; I make it known who you are; I produce you; the king rewards you; and that is all the politics I have to do with."

"And all I will have to do with, either," said Porthos, holding out his hand to D'Artagnan.

But D'Artagnan knew Porthos's grasp; he knew that

once imprisoned within the baron's five fingers, no ordinary hand ever left it without being half crushed. He therefore held out to his friend, not his hand, but his fist; and Porthos did not even perceive the difference. Then they set off from St. Mandé. The servants talked a little with one another in an undertone, and whispered a few words which D'Artagnan understood, but which he took very good care not to let Porthos understand. "Our friend," he said to himself, "was really and truly Aramis's prisoner. Let us now see what will be the result of the liberation of this conspirator."

CHAPTER XI.

THE RAT AND THE CHEESE.

D'ARTAGNAN and Porthos returned on foot, as D'Artagnan had come. When D'Artagnan, as he entered the shop of the Pilon d'Or, had announced to Planchet that M. du Vallon would be one of the privileged travellers, and when the plume in Porthos's hat had made the wooden candles which swung overhead rattle together, something almost like a melancholy presentiment troubled the delight which Planchet had promised himself for the next day. But the grocer's heart was of sterling metal, a precious relic of the good old time, — which is always for those who are getting old the time of their youth, and for those who are young the time of their ancestors. Planchet, notwithstanding the sort of inward shiver which he checked as soon as he experienced it, received Porthos, therefore, with a respect mingled with the most tender cordiality. Porthos, who was a little cold and stiff in his manners at first, on account of the social difference which existed at that period between a baron and a grocer, soon began to get a little softened when he perceived so much good-feeling and so many kind attentions in Planchet. He was particularly touched by the liberty which was permitted him, nay, even offered him, of plunging his large hands into the boxes of dried fruits and preserves, into the sacks of nuts and almonds, and into the drawers full of sweetmeats, so that, notwithstanding Planchet's pressing invitations to go upstairs to the *entresol*, he chose

as his favorite abiding-place, during the evening which he had to spend at Planchet's house, the shop itself, where his fingers could always find whatever his nose had first discovered for him. Delicious figs from Provence, filberts from the forest, and Tours plums were subjects of his uninterrupted attention for five consecutive hours. His teeth, like millstones, cracked the shells, which were scattered all over the floor, where they were trampled by every one who went in and out of the shop. Porthos pulled from the stalk with his lips, at one mouthful, bunches of the rich Muscatel raisins with their beautiful bloom, a half-pound of which thus passed at one gulp from his mouth to his stomach.

In a corner of the shop Planchet's assistants, crouching down in a fright, looked at one another without venturing to open their lips. They did not know who Porthos was, for they had never seen him before. The race of those Titans who had worn the cuirasses of Hugh Capet, Philip Augustus, and Francis I. had already begun to disappear. They asked themselves mentally if he might not possibly be the ogre of the fairy tale, who was going to turn the whole contents of Planchet's shop into his insatiable stomach, and that, too, without in the slightest degree displacing the barrels and boxes that were in it.

Munching, chewing, cracking, nibbling, sucking, and swallowing, Porthos occasionally said to the grocer, "You do a very good business here, friend Planchet."

"He will very soon have none at all to do, if this continues," grumbled the foreman, who had Planchet's word that he should be his successor; and in his despair he approached Porthos, who blocked up the whole of the passage leading from the back shop to the shop itself. He hoped that Porthos would rise, and that this movement would distract his devouring ideas.

"What do you want, my man?" asked Porthos, very affably.

"I should like to pass you, Monsieur, if it would not trouble you too much."

"Very well," said Porthos; "it will not trouble me in the least." At the same moment he took hold of the young fellow by the waistband, lifted him off the ground, and placed him very gently on the other side, smiling all the while with the same affable expression.

As soon as Porthos had placed him on the ground, the lad's legs so shook under him that he fell back upon some sacks of corks. But noticing the giant's gentleness of manner, he ventured again, and said, "Ah, Monsieur, pray be careful!"

"What about, my man?" inquired Porthos.

"You are positively putting fire into your body."

"How is that, my good fellow?" said Porthos.

"All those things are very heating to the system, Monsieur."

"Which?"

"Raisins, nuts, and almonds."

"Yes; but if raisins, nuts, and almonds are heating —"

"There is no doubt at all of it, Monsieur."

"— honey is very cooling," said Porthos, stretching out his hand towards a small keg of honey which was open; and he plunged into it the scoop with which the wants of the customers were supplied, and swallowed a good half-pound at one gulp.

"I must trouble you for some water now, my man," said Porthos.

"In a pail, Monsieur?" asked the lad, innocently.

"No, in a water-bottle; that will be quite enough," replied Porthos, good-humoredly; and raising the bottle to

his mouth, as a trumpeter does his trumpet, he emptied the bottle at a single draught.

Planchet was touched in all the sentiments which correspond to the fibres of ownership and self-love. However, a worthy representative of the hospitality which prevailed in early days, he feigned to be talking very earnestly with D'Artagnan, and incessantly repeated: "Ah, Monsieur, what a happiness! what an honor!"

"What time shall we have supper, Planchet?" inquired Porthos; "I feel hungry."

The foreman clasped his hands together. The two others got under the counters, fearing that Porthos might have a taste for human flesh.

"We shall take only a light luncheon here," said D'Artagnan; "and when we once get to Planchet's country-seat, we shall have supper."

"Ah! so we are going to your country-house, Planchet?" said Porthos; "so much the better!"

"You overwhelm me, Monsieur the Baron."

The "Monsieur the Baron" had a great effect upon the men, who detected a personage of the highest quality in an appetite of that kind. This title, too, reassured them. They had never heard that an ogre was ever called "Monsieur the Baron."

"I will take a few biscuits to eat on the road," said Porthos, carelessly; and so saying, he emptied a whole jar of aniseseed biscuits into the huge pocket of his doublet.

"My shop is saved!" exclaimed Planchet.

"Yes, as the cheese was," said the foreman.

"What cheese?"

"That Dutch cheese inside which a rat had made his way, and we found only the rind left."

Planchet looked all round his shop, and observing the different articles which had escaped Porthos's teeth, he

found the comparison somewhat exaggerated. The foreman, who perceived what was passing in his master's mind, said, "Take care! he has not gone yet."

"Have you any fruit here?" said Porthos, as he went upstairs to the *entresol*, where it had just been announced that some refreshment was prepared.

"Alas!" sighed the grocer, giving D'Artagnan a look full of entreaty, which the latter half understood.

As soon as they had finished eating, they set off. It was late when the three riders, who had left Paris about six in the evening, entered upon the paved street of Fontainebleau. The journey had passed very agreeably. Porthos took a fancy to Planchet's society, because the latter was very respectful in his manners and seemed delighted to talk to him about his meadows, his woods, and his rabbit-warrens. Porthos had all the taste and pride of a landed proprietor.

When D'Artagnan saw his two companions in earnest conversation, he took the opposite side of the road, and letting his bridle drop upon his horse's neck separated himself from the whole world, as he had done from Porthos and from Planchet. The moon shone softly through the dark foliage of the forest. The balmy odors of the open country rose to the horses' nostrils, and they snorted and pranced about with delight. Porthos and Planchet began to talk about hay-crops. Planchet admitted to Porthos that in the more advanced years of his life he had certainly neglected agricultural pursuits for commerce, but that his childhood had been passed in Picardy, in the beautiful meadows where the grass grew as high as the knees, and where he had played under the green apple-trees covered with red-cheeked fruit; he went on to say that he had solemnly promised himself that as soon as he should have made his fortune he would return to

Nature, and end his days as he had begun them, as near as he possibly could to the earth itself, where all men must go at last.

"Eh! eh!" said Porthos; "in that case, my dear M. Planchet, your retreat is not far distant."

"How so?"

"Why, you seem to be in the way of making your fortune very soon."

"Well, we are getting on pretty well, I must admit," replied Planchet.

"Come, tell me, what is the extent of your ambition, and what is the amount you intend to retire upon?"

"There is one circumstance, Monsieur," said Planchet, without answering the question, however interesting it may have been, "which occasions me a good deal of anxiety."

"What is it?" inquired Porthos, looking all round him as if in search of the circumstance that annoyed Planchet, and desirous of freeing him from it.

"Why, formerly," said the grocer, "you used to call me Planchet, quite short, and you would have spoken to me then in a much more familiar manner than you do now."

"Certainly, certainly, I should have said so formerly," replied the good-natured Porthos, with an embarrassment full of delicacy; "but formerly —"

"Formerly I was M. d'Artagnan's lackey; is not that what you mean?"

"Yes."

"Well, if I am not quite his lackey, I am as much as ever his devoted servant; and more than that, since that time —"

"Well, Planchet?"

"Since that time I have had the honor of being in partnership with him."

"Oh!" said Porthos. "What! has D'Artagnan gone into the grocery business?"

"No, no," said D'Artagnan, whom these words had drawn out of his reverie, and who entered into the conversation with that readiness and quickness which distinguished every operation of his mind and body; "it was not D'Artagnan who entered into the grocery business, but Planchet who entered into a political affair with me."

"Yes," said Planchet, with mingled pride and satisfaction; "we transacted a little matter of business together which brought me in a hundred thousand livres, and M. D'Artagnan two hundred thousand."

"Oh!" said Porthos, with admiration.

"So that, Monsieur the Baron," continued the grocer, "I again beg you to be kind enough to call me Planchet, as you used to do; and to speak to me as familiarly as in old times. You cannot possibly imagine the pleasure that it would give me."

"If that be the case, my dear Planchet, I will do so, certainly," replied Porthos. And as he was quite close to Planchet, he raised his hand, as if to strike him on the shoulder, in token of friendly cordiality; but a providential movement of the horse made him miss his aim, so that his hand fell on the crupper of Planchet's horse instead, — which made the animal's legs almost give way.

D'Artagnan burst out laughing, as he said: "Take care, Planchet; for if Porthos begins to like you too much, he will caress you; and if he caresses you, he will knock you as flat as a pancake. Porthos is still very strong, you see."

"Oh," said Planchet, "Mousqueton is not dead, and yet Monsieur the Baron is very fond of him."

"Certainly," said Porthos, with a sigh which made all the three horses rear simultaneously; "and I was saying

only this very morning to D'Artagnan, how much I missed him. But tell me, Planchet?"

"Thank you, Monsieur the Baron, thank you."

"Good lad, good lad! How many acres of park have you?"

"Of park?"

"Yes; we will reckon up the meadows presently, and the woods afterwards."

"Whereabouts, Monsieur?"

"At your château."

"Oh, Monsieur the Baron, I have neither château, nor park, nor meadows, nor woods."

"What have you, then," inquired Porthos; "and why do you call it a country-seat?"

"I did not call it a country-seat, Monsieur the Baron," replied Planchet, somewhat humiliated, "but a simple country-box."

"Ah! I understand. You are modest."

"No, Monsieur the Baron; I speak the plain truth. I have rooms for a couple of friends; that is all."

"But, in that case, whereabouts do your friends walk?"

"In the first place, they can walk about the king's forest, which is very beautiful."

"Yes, I know the forest is very fine," said Porthos; "nearly as beautiful as my forest at Berri."

Planchet opened his eyes very wide. "Have you a forest of the same kind as the forest at Fontainebleau, Monsieur the Baron?" he stammered.

"Yes; I have two, indeed, but the one at Berri is my favorite."

"Why so?" asked Planchet, courteously.

"Because, in the first place, I don't know where it ends; and in the second place because it is full of poachers."

"And how can this abundance of poachers make the forest so agreeable to you?"

"Because they hunt my game, and I hunt them,—which in these peaceful times is for me a picture of war on a small scale."

They had reached this turn of the conversation, when Planchet looking up perceived the first houses of Fontainebleau, the outline of which stood out strongly against the sky, while, rising above the compact and irregularly formed mass of buildings, the pointed roofs of the château were clearly visible, the slates of which glistened beneath the light of the moon, like the scales of an immense fish. "Messieurs," said Planchet, "I have the honor to inform you that we have arrived at Fontainebleau."

CHAPTER XII.

PLANCHET'S COUNTRY-HOUSE.

THE cavaliers looked up, and saw that what the honest Planchet had announced to them was true. Ten minutes afterwards they were in the street called the Rue de Lyon, on the side opposite to the inn with the sign of the Beau-Paon. A high hedge of bushy elders, hawthorn, and wild hops formed a dark and impenetrable fence, behind which rose a white house with a large tiled roof. Two of the windows, which were quite dark, looked upon the street. Between the two a small door, with a porch supported by pillars, formed the entrance to the house. This door was gained by a step raised a little from the ground. Planchet got off his horse as if he intended to knock at the door; but on second thoughts, he took hold of his horse by the bridle, and led it about thirty paces farther on, his two companions following him. He then advanced about another thirty paces, until he arrived at the door of a cart-house, lighted by a grating; and lifting up a wooden latch, the only fastening, pushed open one of the folding-doors. He entered first, leading his horse after him by the bridle into a small courtyard, where an odor met them which revealed their close vicinity to a stable. "That smells all right," said Porthos loudly, getting off his horse; "and I almost begin to think that I am near my own cows at Pierrefonds."

"I have only one cow," Planchet hastened to say modestly.

"And I have thirty," said Porthos; "or, rather, I don't exactly know how many I have."

When the two cavaliers had entered, Planchet fastened the door behind them. In the mean time D'Artagnan, who had dismounted with his usual agility, inhaled the fresh perfumed air with the delight which a Parisian feels at the sight of green fields and fresh foliage, and plucked a piece of honeysuckle with one hand and of columbine with the other. Porthos had laid hold of some peas which were twined round poles stuck into the ground, and ate, or rather browsed upon them, pods and all; and Planchet was busily engaged in trying to wake up an old and infirm peasant, who was fast asleep in a shed, lying on a bed of moss covered with an old stable-coat. The peasant, recognizing Planchet, called him "the master," to the grocer's great satisfaction.

"Put the horses to the rack, old fellow, and give them good allowance," said Planchet.

"Yes, yes; fine animals they are too," said the peasant. "Oh, they shall have as much as they can eat!"

"Gently, gently, my man!" said D'Artagnan. "We are getting on a little too fast. A few oats and a truss of straw, — nothing more."

"Some bran and water for my mare," said Porthos; "for she is very warm, I think."

"Don't be afraid, Messieurs!" replied Planchet; "Daddy Célestin is an old gendarme who fought at Ivry. He knows all about stables; so come into the house." And he led the way along a well-sheltered walk, which crossed a kitchen-garden, then a small paddock, and came out into a little garden behind the house, the principal front of which, as we have already noticed, faced the street. As they approached they could see through two open windows on the ground floor, which led into a sitting-room,

the interior of Planchet's residence. This room, softly lighted by a lamp placed on the table, seemed, from the end of the garden, like a smiling picture of repose, comfort, and happiness. In every direction in which the rays of light fell, whether upon a piece of old china, or upon an article of furniture shining from excessive neatness, or upon the weapons hanging against the wall, the soft light was as softly reflected; and its rays seemed to linger everywhere upon something agreeable to the eye. The lamp which lighted the room, while the foliage of jasmine and columbine hung in masses from the window-frames, dazzlingly illuminated a damask table-cloth as white as snow. The table was laid for two persons. An amber-colored wine sparkled in the long cut-glass bottle; and a large jug of blue china, with a silver lid, was filled with foaming cider. Near the table, in a high-backed arm-chair, reclined, fast asleep, a woman of about thirty years of age, her face the very picture of health and freshness. Curled up upon her knees lay a large yellow cat, with her paws folded under her, and her eyes half closed, purring in that significant manner which, according to feline habits, indicates perfect contentment. The two friends paused before the window in complete amazement, while Planchet, perceiving their astonishment, was filled with delight.

"Ah, Planchet, you rascal!" said D'Artagnan, "I now understand your absences."

"Oh, there is some white linen!" said Porthos in his turn, in a voice of thunder.

At the sound of this voice the cat took flight, the housekeeper woke up suddenly, and Planchet, assuming a gracious air, introduced his two companions into the room, where the table was already laid.

"Permit me, my dear," he said, "to present to you M. le Chevalier d'Artagnan, my patron."

D'Artagnan took the lady's hand in his in the most courteous manner, and with precisely the same chivalrous air with which he would have taken Madame's.

"M. le Baron du Vallon de Bracieux de Pierrefonds," added Planchet.

Porthos made a reverence which Anne of Austria must have approved of, or she would indeed have been hard to please.

It was then Planchet's turn; and he unhesitatingly embraced the lady in question, not, however, until he had made a sign as if requesting D'Artagnan's and Porthos's permission, — a permission which was of course frankly conceded.

D'Artagnan complimented Planchet, and said, "You are indeed a man who knows how to make life agreeable."

"Life, Monsieur," replied Planchet, laughing, "is a capital which a man ought to invest as sensibly as he possibly can."

"And you get very good interest for yours," said Porthos, with a burst of laughter like a peal of thunder.

Planchet turned to his housekeeper. "You have before you, my dear," he said to her, "the two men who have influenced no small portion of my life. I have spoken to you about them both very frequently."

"And two others as well," said the lady, with a very decided Flemish accent.

"Madame is Dutch?" inquired D'Artagnan.

Porthos curled his mustache, — a circumstance which was not lost upon D'Artagnan, who remarked everything.

"I am from Antwerp," replied the lady.

"And her name is Madame Gechter," said Planchet.

"You should not call her Madame," said D'Artagnan.

"Why not?" asked Planchet.

"Because it would make her seem older every time you called her so."

"Well, I call her Trüchen."

"And a very pretty name too," said Porthos.

"Trüchen," said Planchet, "came to me from Flanders, with her virtue and two thousand florins. She ran away from a brute of a husband, who was in the habit of beating her. Being myself a Picard born, I was always very fond of the Artesian women, and it is only a step from Artois to Flanders. She came crying bitterly to her godfather, my predecessor in the Rue des Lombards; she placed her two thousand florins in my establishment, which I have turned to very good account, and which bring her in ten thousand."

"Bravo, Planchet!"

"She is free and well off; she has a cow, a maid-servant, and old Daddy Célestin at her orders. She mends my linen, knits my winter stockings, sees me only every fortnight, and is willing to consider herself happy."

"And I am very happy indeed," said Trüchen, with perfect ingenuousness.

Porthos began to curl the other side of his mustache.

"The deuce!" thought D'Artagnan, "can Porthos have any intentions in that quarter?"

In the mean time, perceiving what was the most important matter in hand, Trüchen had set her cook to work, had laid the table for two more, and covered it with sumptuous fare, — such as converts a supper into a repast, and a repast into a feast, — fresh butter, salt beef, anchovies, tunny, a shopful of Planchet's commodities, fowls, vegetables, salad, fish from the pond and the river, game from the forest, — all the produce, in fact, of the province. Moreover, Planchet returned from the cellar, laden with ten bottles of wine, the glass of which could hardly be seen for the thick coating of dust which covered them.

The sight of all this rejoiced Porthos's heart as he said,

"I am hungry;" and he took his seat beside Dame Truchen, whom he looked at in the most killing manner. D'Artagnan seated himself on the other side of her: while Planchet, discreet and full of delight, sat opposite.

"Do not trouble yourselves," said Planchet, "if Truchen should leave the table now and then during supper; for she will have to look after your bedrooms."

In fact, the housekeeper made her escape very frequently, and they could hear, on the first floor above them, the creaking of the wooden bedsteads and the rolling of the castors on the floor. While this was going on, the three men, Porthos especially, ate and drank gloriously; it was wonderful to see them. The ten full bottles were ten empty ones by the time Truchen returned with the cheese. D'Artagnan still preserved his dignity and self-possession, but Porthos had lost a portion of his; the mirth soon began to be somewhat uproarious. D'Artagnan recommended a new descent into the cellar; and as Planchet did not walk with the steadiness of a well-trained foot-soldier, the captain of the Musketeers proposed to accompany him. They set off, humming songs wild enough to frighten anybody who might be listening. Trüchen remained behind at table with Porthos. While the two wine-bibbers were looking behind the firewood for what they wanted, a sharp, sonorous sound was heard like the impression of a pair of lips on a cheek.

"Porthos fancies himself at La Rochelle," thought D'Artagnan, as they returned freighted with bottles. Planchet was singing so loudly that he was incapable of noticing anything. D'Artagnan, whom nothing ever escaped, remarked how much redder Trüchen's left cheek was than her right. Porthos was sitting and smiling at Trüchen's left, and was curling with both his hands both sides of his mustache at once; and Trüchen, too, was smiling at the

magnificent seigneur. The sparkling wine of Anjou very soon produced a remarkable effect upon the three companions. D'Artagnan had hardly strength enough left to take a candlestick to light Planchet up his own staircase. Planchet was pulling Porthos along, who was following Truchen, who was herself jovial enough. It was D'Artagnan who found out the rooms and the beds. Porthos threw himself into the one destined for him, after his friend had undressed him. D'Artagnan got into his own bed, saying to himself, "*Mordioux!* I had made up my mind never to touch that light-colored wine, which brings my early camp-days back again. Fie! fie! if my musketeers were only to see their captain in such a state!" And drawing the curtains of his bed, he added, "Fortunately enough, though, they will not see me." Planchet was taken in charge by Truchen, who undressed him and closed doors and curtains.

"The country is very amusing," said Porthos, stretching out his legs, which passed through the wooden foot-board, making a tremendous noise, of which, however, no one was capable of taking the slightest notice, so much had they been amused in Planchet's country-house. By two o'clock in the morning every one was fast asleep.

CHAPTER XIII.

SHOWING WHAT COULD BE SEEN FROM PLANCHET'S HOUSE.

THE next morning found the three heroes sleeping soundly. Trüchen had closed the outside blinds to keep the first rays of the sun from the heavy eyes of her guests, like a kind, good woman. It was still perfectly dark, then, beneath Porthos's curtains and under Planchet's canopy, when D'Artagnan, awakened by an indiscreet ray of light which made its way through the windows, jumped hastily out of bed, as if he wished to be the first at the assault. He took by assault Porthos's room, which was next to his own. The worthy Porthos was sleeping with a noise like distant thunder; in the dim obscurity of the room his gigantic frame was prominently displayed, and his swollen fist hung down outside the bed upon the carpet. D'Artagnan awoke Porthos, who rubbed his eyes in a tolerably good humor. In the mean time Planchet was dressing himself, and came to meet at their bedroom doors his two guests, who were still somewhat unsteady from their previous evening's entertainment.

Although it was yet very early, the whole household was already up. The cook was mercilessly slaughtering in the poultry-yard, and Daddy Célestin was gathering cherries in the garden. Porthos, brisk and lively as ever, held out his hand to Planchet, and D'Artagnan requested permission to embrace Madame Trüchen. The latter, who cherished no ill-will towards the vanquished, approached Porthos, upon whom she conferred the same

favor. Porthos embraced Madame Trüchen, heaving an enormous sigh. Planchet took both his friends by the hand.

"I am going to show you over the house," he said. "When we arrived last evening it was as dark as an oven, and we were unable to see anything; but in broad daylight everything looks different, and you will be satisfied, I hope."

"If we begin by the view you have," said D'Artagnan, "that charms me beyond everything. I have always lived in royal mansions, you know; and princes have some very good ideas upon the selection of points of view."

"I am a great stickler for a good view myself," said Porthos. "At my Château de Pierrefonds I have had four avenues laid out, and at the end of each is a landscape of a character altogether different from the others."

"You shall see my prospect," said Planchet; and he led his two guests to a window.

"Ah!" said D'Artagnan, "this is the Rue de Lyon."

"Yes, I have two windows on this side, — a paltry, insignificant view, for there is always that bustling and noisy inn, which is a very disagreeable neighbor. I had four windows here, but I have kept only two."

"Let us go on," said D'Artagnan.

They entered a corridor leading to the bedrooms, and Planchet pushed open the outside blinds.

"Holloa! what is that out yonder?" said Porthos.

"The forest," said Planchet. "It is the horizon, — always a thick line, which is yellow in the spring, green in the summer, red in the autumn, and white in the winter."

"All very well; but it is like a curtain, which prevents one from seeing a greater distance."

"Yes," said Planchet; "still, one can see, at all events, everything between."

"Ah, the open country!' said Porthos. "But what is that I see out there, — crosses and stones?"

"Ah! that is the cemetery," exclaimed D'Artagnan.

"Precisely," said Planchet; "I assure you it is very curious. Hardly a day passes in which some one is not buried there; for Fontainebleau is by no means an inconsiderable place. Sometimes we see young girls clothed in white carrying banners; at others, some of the town council, or rich citizens, with choristers and all the parish authorities; and then, too, we see some of the officers of the king's household."

"I should not like that," said Porthos.

"There is not indeed much amusement in it," said D'Artagnan.

"I assure you it encourages religious thoughts," replied Planchet.

"Oh, I don't deny that!"

"But," continued Planchet, "we must all die one day or another; and I once met with a maxim somewhere which I have remembered, that the thought of death is a thought that will do us all good."

"I am far from saying the contrary," said Porthos.

"But," objected D'Artagnan, "the thought of green fields, flowers, rivers, blue horizons, extensive and boundless plains, is no less likely to do us good."

"If I had any, I should be far from rejecting them," said Planchet; "but possessing only this little cemetery, full of flowers, so moss-grown, shady, and quiet, I am contented with it, and I think of those who live in town, in the Rue des Lombards for instance, and who have to listen every day to the rumbling of two thousand vehicles and to the trampling of a hundred and fifty thousand foot-passengers in the mud."

"But living," said Porthos, "living; remember that."

"That is exactly the reason," said Planchet, timidly, "why I feel that it does me good to see a few of the dead."

"Upon my word," said D'Artagnan, "that fellow Planchet was born to be a poet as well as a grocer."

"Monsieur," said Planchet, "I am one of those good-humored men whom Heaven has created to live a certain space of time, and to consider all things good which they meet with during their stay on earth."

D'Artagnan sat down close to the window; and as there seemed to be something substantial in Planchet's philosophy, he mused over it.

"Ah!" exclaimed Porthos, "if I am not mistaken, we are going to have a representation now, for I think I heard something like chanting."

"Yes," said D'Artagnan; "I hear singing too."

"Oh, it is only a burial of a very poor description," said Planchet, disdainfully; "the officiating priest, the beadle, and only one chorister boy, nothing more. You observe, Messieurs, that the defunct lady or gentleman could not have been of very high rank."

"No; no one seems to be following the coffin."

"Yes," said Porthos; "I see a man."

"You are right; a man wrapped up in a cloak," said D'Artagnan.

"It 's not worth looking at," said Planchet.

"I find it interesting," said D'Artagnan, earnestly, leaning on the window.

"Come, come, you are beginning to take a fancy to the place already," said Planchet, delightedly. "It is exactly my own case. I was so melancholy at first that I could do nothing but make the sign of the cross all day, and the chants were like nails being driven into my head; but now the chants lull me to sleep, and no bird I have ever

seen or heard can sing better than those which are to be met with in this cemetery."

"Well," said Porthos, "this is beginning to get a little dull for me, and I prefer going downstairs."

Planchet with one bound was beside his guest, to whom he offered his hand to lead him into the garden.

"What!" said Porthos to D'Artagnan, as he turned round, "are you going to remain here?"

"Yes, my friend; I shall join you presently."

"Well, M. d'Artagnan is right, after all," said Planchet; "are they beginning to bury yet?"

"Not yet."

"Ah! yes, the grave-digger is waiting until the cords are fastened round the bier. But see! a woman has just entered the cemetery at the other end."

"Yes, yes, my dear Planchet," said D'Artagnan, quickly; "but leave me, leave me. I feel that I am beginning already to be much comforted by my meditations; so do not interrupt me."

Planchet left; and D'Artagnan remained, devouring with his eager gaze from behind the half-closed blinds what was taking place just before him. The two bearers of the corpse had unfastened the straps of the litter, and were letting their burden descend gently into the open grave. A few paces distant, the man with the cloak wrapped round him, the only spectator of this melancholy scene, was leaning with his back against a large cypress-tree, and kept his face and person entirely concealed from the grave-diggers and the priests. The corpse was buried in five minutes. The grave having been filled up, the priests turned away; and the grave-digger, having addressed a few words to them, followed them as they moved away. The man in the cloak bowed as they passed him, and put a piece of money into the grave-digger's hand.

"*Mordioux!*" murmured D'Artagnan; "why, that man is Aramis himself."

Aramis, in fact, remained alone, on that side at least; for hardly had he turned his head when a woman's footsteps and the rustling of her dress were heard in the path close to him. He immediately turned round, and took off his hat with the most ceremonious respect; he led the lady under the shelter of some walnut and lime trees which overshadowed a magnificent tomb.

"Ah! who would have thought it?" said D'Artagnan; "the Bishop of Vannes at a rendezvous! He is still the same Abbé Aramis as when he played the gallant at Noisy-le-Sec. Yes," added the musketeer; "but as it is in a cemetery the rendezvous is sacred;" and he began to laugh.

The conversation lasted for fully half an hour. D'Artagnan could not see the lady's face, for she kept her back turned towards him; but he saw perfectly well, by the erect attitude of both the speakers, by their gestures, by the measured and careful manner with which they glanced at each other, either by way of attack or defence, that they must be conversing about any other subject than that of love. At the end of the conversation the lady rose, and bowed most profoundly to Aramis.

"Oh!" said D'Artagnan; "this rendezvous finishes like one of a very tender nature, though. The cavalier kneels at the beginning, the young lady by and by gets tamed down, and then it is she who has to supplicate. Who is this girl? I would give anything to ascertain."

This seemed impossible, however, for Aramis was the first to leave; the lady carefully concealed her head and face, and then immediately departed. D'Artagnan could hold out no longer. He ran to the window which looked out on the Rue de Lyon, and saw Aramis just entering

the inn. The lady was proceeding in quite an opposite direction, and seemed, in fact, to be about to rejoin an equipage, consisting of two led horses and a carriage, which he could see standing close to the borders of the forest. She was walking slowly, her head bent down, absorbed in the deepest meditation.

"*Mordioux! mordioux!* I must and will learn who that woman is," said the musketeer again; and then, without further deliberation, he set off in pursuit of her. As he was going along he tried to think how he could possibly contrive to make her raise her veil. "She is not young," he said, "and is a woman of high rank in society. I ought to know that figure and carriage." As he ran, the sound of his spurs and of his boots upon the hard ground of the street made a strange jingling noise, — a fortunate circumstance in itself, which he had not reckoned upon. The noise disturbed the lady; she seemed to fancy that she was being either followed or pursued, which was indeed the case, and turned round. D'Artagnan started as if he had received a charge of small shot in his legs, and then turning suddenly round, as if he were going back the same way he had come, murmured, "Madame de Chevreuse!" D'Artagnan would not go home until he had learned everything. He asked Daddy Célestin to inquire of the grave-digger whose body it was they had buried that morning.

"A poor Franciscan mendicant friar," replied the latter, "who had not even a dog to love him in this world and to accompany him to his last resting-place."

"If that were really the case," thought D'Artagnan, "Aramis would not have been present at his funeral. The Bishop of Vannes is not precisely a dog so far as devotion goes; his scent, however, is quite as keen, I admit."

CHAPTER XIV.

HOW PORTHOS, TRÜCHEN, AND PLANCHET PARTED WITH ONE ANOTHER ON FRIENDLY TERMS, THANKS TO D'ARTAGNAN.

THERE was good living in Planchet's house. Porthos broke a ladder and two cherry-trees, stripped the raspberry-bushes, and was only unable to succeed in reaching the strawberry-beds on account, as he said, of his belt. Trüchen, who had got quite sociable with the giant, said that it was not the belt so much as the fear of bursting it; and Porthos, in a state of the highest delight, embraced Trüchen, who gathered him a handful of the strawberries, and made him eat them out of her hand. D'Artagnan, who came up in the mean time, scolded Porthos for his indolence, and silently pitied Planchet.

Porthos breakfasted with a very good appetite; and when he had finished he said, looking at Trüchen, "I could make myself very happy here."

Trüchen smiled at his remark; and so did Planchet, but the latter not without some embarrassment.

D'Artagnan then addressed Porthos: "You must not, my friend, let the delights of Capua make you forget the real object of our journey to Fontainebleau."

"My presentation to the king?"

"Certainly. I am going to take a turn in the town to get everything ready for that. Do not think of leaving the house, I beg."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Porthos.

Planchet looked at D'Artagnan nervously. "Will you be away long?" he inquired.

"No, my friend; and this very evening I will release you from two troublesome guests."

"Oh! M. d'Artagnan! can you say —"

"No, no; you are an excellent-hearted fellow, but your house is very small. Such a house, with only a couple of acres of land, would be fit for a king, and make him very happy too. But you were not born a great lord."

"No more was M. Porthos," murmured Planchet.

"But he has become so, my good fellow; his income has been a hundred thousand livres a year for the last twenty years, and for the last fifty years he has been the owner of a couple of fists and a backbone which have never found their match throughout the whole realm of France. Porthos is a man of the very greatest consequence compared to you, my son; and — well, I need say no more, for I know you are an intelligent fellow."

"No, no, Monsieur; explain what you mean."

"Look at your orchard stripped, your larder empty, your bedstead broken, your cellar almost exhausted; look too — at Madame Trüchen —"

"Oh, good gracious!" said Planchet.

"Porthos, you see, is lord of thirty villages, each containing three hundred lively vassals; and he is a very handsome man, that Porthos!"

"Oh, good gracious!" repeated Planchet.

"Madame Trüchen is an excellent person," continued D'Artagnan; "but keep her for yourself, do you understand?" and he slapped him on the shoulder.

Planchet at this moment perceived Porthos and Trüchen sitting close together in an arbor. Trüchen, with a grace of manner peculiarly Flemish, was making a pair of ear-

rings for Porthos out of double cherries, while Porthos was laughing as amorously as Samson did with Delilah. Planchet pressed D'Artagnan's hand, and ran towards the arbor. We must do Porthos the justice to say that he did not move as they approached, and very likely he did not think that he was doing any harm. Nor indeed did Trüchen move, either, which rather put Planchet out; but he had been so accustomed to see fashionable people in his shop, that he found no difficulty in putting a good countenance on what was disagreeable to him. Planchet seized Porthos by the arm, and proposed to go and look at the horses, but Porthos said he was tired. Planchet then suggested that the Baron du Vallon should taste some cordial of his own manufacture, which was not to be equalled anywhere, — an offer which the baron immediately accepted; and in this way Planchet managed to engage his enemy's attention during the whole of the day, by dint of sacrificing his cellar in preference to his *amour propre*. Two hours afterwards D'Artagnan returned.

"Everything is arranged," he said; "I saw his Majesty at the very moment he was setting off for the chase. The king expects us this evening."

"The king expects me!" cried Porthos, drawing himself up. It is a sad thing to have to confess, but a man's heart is like a restless billow; for from that very moment Porthos ceased to look at Madame Truchen in that touching manner which had so softened the heart of the lady from Antwerp. Planchet encouraged these ambitious leanings in the best way he could. He related, or rather reviewed, all the splendors of the last reign, — its battles, sieges, and grand court ceremonies. He spoke of the luxurious display which the English made, and of the prizes which the three brave companions had won, and told how D'Artagnan, who at the beginning had been the humblest

of the three, had become their chief. He fired Porthos with a generous feeling of enthusiasm, by reminding him of his early youth now passed away; he enlarged, according to his ability, on the chastity of some great lord, and his religious respect for the obligations of friendship; he was eloquent, and skilful in his choice of subjects. He delighted Porthos, frightened Trüchen, and made D'Artagnan think.

At six o'clock the musketeer ordered the horses to be brought round, and told Porthos to get ready. He thanked Planchet for his kind hospitality, whispered a few vague words about a post he might succeed in obtaining for him at court, which immediately raised Planchet in Truchen's estimation, in which the poor grocer — so good, so generous, so devoted — had become much lowered ever since the appearance and comparison with him of the two great gentlemen. Such, however, is woman's nature; she is ambitious to possess what she has not yet obtained, and disdains it as soon as it is acquired.

After having rendered this service to his friend Planchet, D'Artagnan said in a low tone to Porthos, "That is a very beautiful ring you have on your finger."

"It is worth three hundred pistoles," said Porthos.

"Madame Truchen will remember you better if you leave her that ring," replied D'Artagnan, — a suggestion which Porthos seemed to hesitate to adopt.

"You think it is not beautiful enough, perhaps," said the musketeer. "I understand your feelings. A great lord like you would not think of accepting the hospitality of an old servant without paying him most handsomely for it; but I am sure that Planchet is too good-hearted a fellow to remember that you have an income of a hundred thousand livres a year."

"I have more than half a mind," said Porthos, flattered

by the remark, "to make Madame Trüchen a present of my little farm at Bracieux; that would be a finger-ring for her, — twelve acres."

"It is too much, my good Porthos, too much just at present. Keep it for a future occasion." He then took the ring off Porthos's finger, and approaching Truchen said to her: "Madame, Monsieur the Baron hardly knows how to entreat you, out of regard for him, to accept this little ring. M. du Vallon is one of the most generous and discreet men of my acquaintance. He wished to offer you a farm that he has at Bracieux, but I dissuaded him from it."

"Oh!" said Trüchen, looking eagerly at the diamond.

"Monsieur the Baron!" exclaimed Planchet, quite overcome.

"My good friend!" stammered out Porthos, delighted at having been so well represented by D'Artagnan.

These several exclamations, uttered at the same moment, made quite a pathetic winding-up of a day which might have terminated grotesquely. But D'Artagnan was there, and on every occasion in which he had exercised any control, matters had ended in the way he desired. There were general embracings; Trüchen, whom the baron's munificence had restored to her proper position, very timidly, and blushing all the while, presented simply her forehead to the great lord with whom she had been on such very excellent terms the evening before. Planchet himself was overcome by a feeling of the deepest humility. In the same generous vein Porthos would have emptied his pockets into the hands of the cook and of Célestin; but D'Artagnan stopped him.

"No," he said; "it is now my turn." And he gave one pistole to the woman and two to the man; and the benedictions which were showered down upon them would

have rejoiced the heart of Harpagon himself, and have rendered even him prodigal of his money.

D'Artagnan made Planchet lead them to the château, and introduced Porthos into his own apartment, where he arrived safely without having been perceived by those whom he wished to avoid.

CHAPTER XV

THE PRESENTATION OF PORTHOS.

At seven o'clock the same evening, the king gave an audience to an ambassador from the United Provinces, in the grand reception-room. The audience lasted a quarter of an hour. After this his Majesty received those who had been recently presented, together with a few ladies, who paid their respects first. In one corner of the room, concealed behind a column, Porthos and D'Artagnan were conversing together, waiting until their turn should come.

"Have you heard the news?" inquired the musketeer of his friend.

"No!"

"Well, look then!" Porthos raised himself on tiptoe, and saw M. Fouquet in full court dress, leading Aramis towards the king.

"Aramis!" said Porthos.

"Presented to the king by M. Fouquet."

"Ah!" ejaculated Porthos.

"For having fortified Belle-Isle," continued D'Artagnan.

"And I?"

"You — ah! you, as I have already had the honor of telling you, are the good-natured, kind-hearted Porthos; and so they begged you to take care of St. Mandé a little while."

"Ah!" repeated Porthos.

"But, very happily, I was there," said D'Artagnan, "and presently it will be my turn."

At this moment Fouquet addressed the king. "Sire,"

he said, "I have a favor to solicit of your Majesty. M. d'Herblay is not ambitious, but he knows he can be of some service. Your Majesty needs a representative at Rome, who should be able to exercise a powerful influence there; may I request a cardinal's hat for M. d'Herblay?" The king started. "I do not often solicit anything of your Majesty," said Fouquet.

"That is a reason, certainly," replied the king, who always expressed any hesitation which he might have in that manner, and to which remark there was nothing to be said in reply.

Fouquet and Aramis looked at each other.

The king resumed: "M. d'Herblay can serve us equally well in France, — an archbishopric, for instance."

"Sire," objected Fouquet, with a grace of manner peculiarly his own, "your Majesty overwhelms M. d'Herblay. The archbishopric may, in your Majesty's extreme kindness, be conferred in addition to the hat; the one does not exclude the other."

The king admired the readiness which Fouquet displayed, and smiled, saying, "D'Artagnan himself could not have answered better."

The king had no sooner pronounced the name, than D'Artagnan appeared. "Did your Majesty call me?" he said.

Aramis and Fouquet drew back a step, as if they were about to retire.

"Permit me, Sire," said D'Artagnan, quickly, as he led forward Porthos, — "permit me to present to your Majesty M. le Baron du Vallon, one of the bravest gentlemen of France."

Aramis, at the sight of Porthos, turned as pale as death, while Fouquet clinched his hands under his ruffles. D'Artagnan smiled at both of them; while Porthos bowed, visibly overcome before the royal presence.

"Porthos here?" murmured Fouquet in Aramis's ear.

"Hush! there is some treachery at work," said the latter.

"Sire," said D'Artagnan, "more than six years ago I ought to have presented M. du Vallon to your Majesty; but certain men resemble stars, they move not unless their friends accompany them The Pleiades are never disunited; and that is the reason I have selected, for the purpose of presenting M. du Vallon to you, the very moment when you would see M. d'Herblay by his side."

Aramis almost lost countenance. He looked at D'Artagnan with a proud, haughty air, as though to accept the defiance which the latter seemed to throw down.

"Ah! these gentlemen are good friends, then?" said the king.

"Excellent friends, Sire; the one can answer for the other. Ask M. de Vannes how Belle-Isle was fortified."

Fouquet moved back a step.

"Belle-Isle," said Aramis, coldly, "was fortified by that gentleman;" and he indicated Porthos with his hand, who bowed a second time.

Louis could not withhold his admiration, though at the same time his suspicions were aroused.

"Yes," said D'Artagnan; "but ask Monsieur the Baron who aided him in his labors."

"Aramis," said Porthos, frankly; and he indicated the bishop.

"What the deuce does all this mean," thought the bishop, "and what sort of a termination are we to expect to this comedy?"

"What!" exclaimed the king, "is Monsieur the Cardinal — I mean, Monsieur the Bishop — called Aramis?"

"A *nom de guerre*," said D'Artagnan

"A name of friendship," said Aramis.

"A truce to modesty!" exclaimed D'Artagnan. "Beneath the priest's robe, Sire, is concealed the most brilliant officer, the bravest gentleman, and the wisest theologian in your kingdom."

Louis raised his head. "And an engineer," he said, admiring Aramis's noble countenance and calm self possession.

"An engineer for a particular purpose, Sire," said the latter.

"My companion in the Musketeers, Sire," said D'Artagnan, with great warmth of manner; "the man who has more than a hundred times aided your father's ministers by his advice, — M. d'Herblay, in a word, who with M. du Vallon, myself, and M. le Comte de la Fère, who is known to your Majesty, formed that quartette which was a good deal talked about during the late king's reign and during your Majesty's minority."

"And who has fortified Belle-Isle?" the king repeated in a significant tone.

Aramis advanced and said, "In order to serve the son as I have served the father."

D'Artagnan looked at Aramis most narrowly while he uttered these words, which displayed so much true respect, so much warm devotion, such entire frankness and sincerity, that even he, D'Artagnan, the eternal doubter, almost infallible in his judgment, was deceived by it. "A man who lies cannot speak in such a tone as that," he said.

Louis was overcome by it. "In that case," he said to Fouquet, who anxiously awaited the result of this ordeal, "the cardinal's hat is granted. M. d'Herblay, I pledge you my honor that the first promotion shall be yours. Thank M. Fouquet for it."

These words were overheard by Colbert; they stung

him to the quick, and he left the salon abruptly. "And you, M. du Vallon," said the king, "what have you to ask? I am pleased to have it in my power to acknowledge the services of those who were faithful to my father."

"Sire," began Porthos; but he was unable to proceed further.

"Sire," exclaimed D'Artagnan, "this worthy gentleman is overpowered by your Majesty's presence, — he who has so valiantly sustained the looks and the fire of a thousand foes. But knowing what his thoughts are, I — who am more accustomed to gaze upon the sun — can translate them; he needs nothing, he desires nothing but to have the happiness of gazing upon your Majesty for a quarter of an hour."

"You shall sup with me this evening," said the king, saluting Porthos with a gracious smile.

Porthos became crimson from delight and pride. The king dismissed him; and D'Artagnan pushed him out into the hall, after he had embraced him warmly.

"Sit next to me at table," said Porthos in his ear.

"Yes, my friend."

"Aramis is annoyed with me, I think."

"Aramis has never liked you so much as he does now. Fancy! it was I who was just now the means of his getting the cardinal's hat."

"Of course," said Porthos. "By the by, does the king like to have his guests eat much at his table?"

"It is a compliment to himself if you do," said D'Artagnan, "for he possesses a royal appetite."

"You gratify me exceedingly," said Porthos.

CHAPTER XVI.

EXPLANATIONS.

Aramis had cleverly managed to effect a diversion for the purpose of finding D'Artagnan and Porthos. He came up to the latter, behind one of the columns, and as he pressed his hand, said, "So you have escaped from my prison?"

"Do not scold him," said D'Artagnan; "it was I, dear Aramis, who set him free."

"Ah! my friend," replied Aramis, looking at Porthos, "could you not have waited with a little more patience?"

D'Artagnan came to the assistance of Porthos, who already began to breathe hard in perplexity.

"You see," said he to Aramis, "you members of the Church are great politicians; we, mere soldiers, go at once to the point. The facts are these. I went to pay my dear Baisemeaux a visit—"

Aramis pricked up his ears.

"Stay!" said Porthos; "you remind me that I have a letter from Baisemeaux for you, Aramis;" and Porthos held out to the bishop the letter which we have already seen. Aramis begged to be allowed to read it, and read it without D'Artagnan's feeling in the slightest degree embarrassed by the circumstance that he was so well acquainted with the contents of it. Besides, Aramis's face was so impenetrable that D'Artagnan could not but admire him more than ever; after he had read it, he put the letter into his pocket with the calmest possible air.

"You were saying, Captain?" he observed.

"I was saying," continued the musketeer, "that I had gone to pay Baisemeaux a visit on his Majesty's service."

"On his Majesty's service?" said Aramis.

"Yes," said D'Artagnan, "and, naturally enough, we talked about you and our friends. I must say that Baisemeaux received me coldly; so I soon took my leave of him. As I was returning, a soldier accosted me, and said (no doubt he recognized me, notwithstanding I was in citizen's dress), 'Captain, will you be good enough to read me the name written on this envelope?' and I read, 'To M. du Vallon, at M. Fouquet's, St. Mandé.' 'The deuce,' said I to myself, 'Porthos has not returned, then, as I fancied, to Belle-Isle or Pierrefonds, but is at M. Fouquet's house, at St. Mandé; and as M. Fouquet is not at St. Mandé, Porthos must be quite alone, or, at all events, with Aramis; I will go and see Porthos.' And I accordingly went to see Porthos."

"Very good," said Aramis, thoughtfully.

"You never told me that," said Porthos.

"I did not have the time, my friend."

"And you brought back Porthos with you here to Fontainebleau?"

"Yes, to Planchet's house."

"Does Planchet live at Fontainebleau?" inquired Aramis.

"Yes, near the cemetery," said Porthos, thoughtlessly.

"What do you mean by 'near the cemetery'?" said Aramis, suspiciously.

"Come," thought the musketeer, "since there is to be a squabble, let us take advantage of it."

"Yes; the cemetery," said Porthos. "Planchet certainly is a very excellent fellow, who makes very excellent preserves; but his house has windows which look out upon the cemetery, and a very melancholy prospect it is. So this morning —"

"This morning?" said Aramis, more and more excited.

D'Artagnan turned his back to them, and walked to the window, where he began to drum a march upon one of the panes of glass.

"Yes, this morning," Porthos went on, "we saw a man buried there."

"Ah!"

"Very depressing, was it not? I should never be able to live in a house from which burials can always be seen. D'Artagnan, on the contrary, seems to like it very much."

"So D'Artagnan saw it as well?"

"He not only saw it; he literally never took his eyes from it the whole time."

Aramis started, and turned to look at the musketeer; but the latter was already engaged in earnest conversation with De Saint-Aignan. Aramis continued to question Porthos; and when he had squeezed all the juice out of this enormous lemon, he threw the peel aside. He turned towards his friend D'Artagnan, and clapping him on the shoulder, when De Saint-Aignan had left him, the king's supper having been announced, said, "My friend."

"Yes, my dear fellow," replied D'Artagnan.

"We do not sup with his Majesty, I believe?"

"Yes, indeed, I do."

"Can you give me ten minutes' conversation?"

"Twenty, if you like. His Majesty will take quite that time to get properly seated at table."

"Where shall we talk, then?"

"Here, upon these seats, if you like. The king has left; we can sit down, and the hall is empty."

"Let us sit down, then."

They sat down, and Aramis took one of D'Artagnan's hands in his.

"Tell me candidly, my dear friend," said he, "whether you have not induced Porthos to distrust me a little."

"I admit that I have, but not as you understand it. I saw that Porthos was bored to death, and I wished, by presenting him to the king, to do for him and for you what you would never do for yourself."

"What is that?"

"Speak in your own praise."

"And you have done it most nobly. I thank you."

"And I brought the cardinal's hat a little nearer, just as it seemed to be retreating from you."

"Ah, I admit that," said Aramis, with a singular smile; "you are, indeed, not to be matched for making your friends' fortunes for them."

"You see, then, that I acted only with the view of making Porthos's fortune for him."

"Oh, I meant to have done that myself; but your arm reaches farther than ours."

It was now D'Artagnan's turn to smile.

"Come," said Aramis, "we ought to deal truthfully with each other; do you still love me, my dear D'Artagnan?"

"The same as I used to do," replied D'Artagnan, without committing himself too much by this reply.

"In that case, thanks; and now, for the most perfect frankness," said Aramis. "You came to Belle-Isle for the king."

"*Pardieu!*"

"You wished, then, to deprive us of the pleasure of offering Belle-Isle completely fortified to the king."

"But, my friend, before I could deprive you of that pleasure, I ought to have been made acquainted with your intention of doing so."

"You came to Belle-Isle without knowing anything?"

"Of you? yes. How the devil could I imagine that Aramis had become so clever an engineer as to be able to fortify like Polybius or Archimedes?"

"True. And yet you detected me yonder?"

"Oh, yes!"

"And Porthos too?"

"My dear fellow, I did not discover that Aramis was an engineer. I was only able to discover that Porthos might have become one. There is a Latin saying, 'One becomes an orator, one is born a poet;' but it has never been said, 'One is born Porthos, and one becomes an engineer.'"

"Your wit is always amusing," said Aramis, coldly. "Well, then, I will go on."

"Do so."

"When you found out our secret, you made all the haste you could to communicate it to the king."

"I certainly made as much haste as I could, my good friend, since I saw that you were making still more. When a man weighing two hundred and fifty-eight pounds, as Porthos does, rides post; when a gouty prelate — I beg your pardon, but you told me you were so — when a prelate scours along the road, — I naturally suppose that my two friends, who did not wish to be communicative with me, had certain matters of the highest importance to conceal from me, and so I made as much haste as my leanness and the absence of gout would allow."

"Did it not occur to you, my dear friend, that you might be rendering Porthos and myself a very sad service?"

"Yes, I thought it not unlikely; but you and Porthos made me play a very ridiculous part at Belle-Isle."

"Forgive me," said Aramis.

"Excuse me," said D'Artagnan.

"So that," pursued Aramis, "you now know everything?"

"No, indeed."

"You know that I was obliged to inform M. Fouquet at once of what had happened, in order that he might anticipate what you might have to tell the king?"

"That is rather obscure."

"Not at all; M. Fouquet has his enemies, — you will admit that, I suppose."

"Oh, yes."

"And one in particular."

"A dangerous one?"

"A mortal enemy. Well, in order to counteract that enemy's influence, it was necessary that M. Fouquet should give the king a proof of a great devotion to him and of his readiness to make the greatest sacrifices. He surprised his Majesty by offering him Belle-Isle. If you had been the first to reach Paris, the surprise would have been destroyed; it would have looked as if we had yielded to fear."

"I understand."

"That is the whole mystery," said Aramis, satisfied that he had quite convinced the musketeer.

"Only," said the latter, "it would have been more simple to have taken me aside at Belle-Isle, and said to me, 'My dear D'Artagnan, we are fortifying Belle-Isle-en-Mer in order to offer it to the king. Render us the service of telling us for whom you are acting. Are you a friend of M. Colbert or of M. Fouquet?' Perhaps I should not have answered you, but you would have added, 'Are you my friend?' I should have said, 'Yes.'" Aramis hung his head. "In this way," continued D'Artagnan, "you would have paralyzed my movements, and I should have gone to the king and said, 'Sire, M. Fouquet is fortifying

Belle-Isle, and exceedingly well too; but here is a note which the governor of Belle-Isle gave me for your Majesty;' or, 'M. Fouquet is about to wait upon your Majesty to explain his intentions with regard to it.' I should not have been placed in an absurd position; you would have enjoyed your surprise, and we should not have had any occasion to look askance at each other when we met."

"While, on the contrary," replied Aramis, "you have acted altogether as one friendly to M. Colbert; and you really are a friend of his, I suppose?"

"Certainly not, indeed!" exclaimed the captain. "M. Colbert is a mean fellow, and I hate him as I used to hate Mazarin, but without fearing him."

"Well, then," said Aramis, "I love M. Fouquet, and his interests are mine. You know my position. I have no property or means whatever. M. Fouquet gave me several livings, a bishopric as well; M. Fouquet has served and obliged me like the generous-hearted man he is, and I know the world sufficiently well to appreciate a kindness when I meet with it. M. Fouquet has won my regard, and I have devoted myself to his service."

"You could n't do better; you will find him a very good master."

Aramis bit his lips, and then said, "The best, I think, a man could possibly have." He then paused for a minute, D'Artagnan taking good care not to interrupt him. "I suppose you know how Porthos got mixed up in all this?"

"No," said D'Artagnan. "I am curious, of course; but I never question a friend when he wishes to keep his real secret from me."

"Well, then, I will tell you."

"It is hardly worth the trouble if the confidence is to bind me in any way."

"Oh, fear nothing! There is no man whom I love better

than Porthos, because he is so simple-minded and good. Porthos is so straightforward in everything. Since I have become a bishop I have looked for those simple natures which make me love truth and hate intrigue."

D'Artagnan stroked his mustache.

"I saw Porthos, and again cultivated his acquaintance; his own time hanging idly on his hands, his presence recalled my earlier and better days, — not, however, that I am so very wicked at present. I sent for Porthos to come to Vannes. M. Fouquet, whose regard for me is very great, having learned that Porthos and I were attached to each other, promised him increase of rank at the earliest promotion; and that is the whole secret."

"I shall not abuse your confidence," said D'Artagnan.

"I am sure of that, my dear friend; no one has a finer sense of honor than yourself."

"I flatter myself that you are right, Aramis."

"And now," — and here the prelate looked searchingly and scrutinizingly at his friend, — "now let us talk of ourselves and for ourselves. Will you become one of M. Fouquet's friends? Do not interrupt me until you know what that means."

"Well, I am listening."

"Will you become a marshal of France, peer, duke, and the possessor of a duchy, with a million of revenue?"

"But, my friend," replied D'Artagnan, "what must one do to get all that?"

"Belong to M. Fouquet."

"But I already belong to the king, my dear friend."

"Not exclusively, I suppose?"

"Oh! D'Artagnan cannot be divided."

"You have, I presume, ambitions, as noble hearts like yours have?"

"Yes, certainly I have."

"Well?"

"Well, I wish to be a marshal of France; the king will make me marshal, duke, peer, — the king will give me all that."

Aramis fixed his clear and searching gaze upon D'Artagnan.

"Is not the king master?" said D'Artagnan.

"No one disputes it; but Louis XIII. was master also."

"Oh! but, my dear friend, between Richelieu and Louis XIII. there was no M. d'Artagnan," said the musketeer, very quietly.

"There are many stumbling-blocks round the king," said Aramis.

"Not for the king."

"Very likely not; still —"

"One moment, Aramis. I observe that every one thinks of himself and never of this poor young prince; I will maintain myself in maintaining him."

"And if you meet with ingratitude?"

"The weak alone are afraid of that."

"You are quite certain of yourself?"

"I think so."

"Still, the king may have no further need of you!"

"On the contrary, I think his need of me will be greater than ever; and hearken, my dear fellow, if it became necessary to arrest a new Condé, what would do it? This — this alone in all France!" and D'Artagnan struck his sword.

"You are right," said Aramis, turning very pale; and then he rose and pressed D'Artagnan's hand.

"There is the last summons for supper," said the captain of the Musketeers; "will you excuse me?"

Aramis threw his arm round the musketeer's neck, and

said, "A friend like you is the brightest jewel in the royal crown." Then they separated.

"I was right," thought D'Artagnan; "there is something on foot."

"We must make haste to fire the train," said Aramis, "for D'Artagnan has discovered the match."

CHAPTER XVII.

MADAME AND DE GUICHE.

It will not be forgotten that the Comte de Guiche had left the room on the day when Louis XIV. had offered to La Vallière with so much generosity the beautiful bracelets he had won at the lottery. The count walked to and fro for some time outside the palace in the greatest distress, from a thousand suspicions and anxieties with which his mind was beset. Presently he stopped and waited on the terrace opposite the grove of trees, watching for Madame's departure. More than half an hour passed away; and as he was at that moment quite alone, the count could hardly have had any very diverting ideas at his command. He drew his tablets from his pocket, and after much hesitation determined to write these words:

"Madame, — I implore you to grant me one moment's conversation. Do not be alarmed at this request, which contains nothing in any way opposed to the profound respect with which I subscribe myself," etc.

He had signed and folded this singular supplication, when he observed many ladies leaving the château, and then several men, — in fact, almost every person who had formed the queen's circle. He saw La Vallière herself, then Montalais talking with Malicorne; he saw the departure of the very last of the numerous guests who had a short time before thronged the queen-mother's boudoir.

Madame herself had not passed. She would be obliged, however, to cross the courtyard in order to enter her own apartments; and from the terrace De Guiche could see all that was passing in the courtyard. At last he saw Madame leave, attended by two pages, who were carrying torches before her. She was walking very quickly; and as soon as she reached the door, she said, "Pages, let some one go and inquire after M. le Comte de Guiche; he has to render me an account of a commission he had to execute for me. If he should be disengaged, request him to be good enough to come to my apartment."

De Guiche remained silent and concealed in the shade; but as soon as Madame had withdrawn, he darted from the terrace down the steps, and assumed a most indifferent air, so that the pages who were hurrying towards his rooms might meet him.

"Ah, Madame is seeking me!" he said to himself, quite overcome; and he crushed in his hand the letter which had now become useless.

"Monsieur the Count," said one of the pages, perceiving him, "we are indeed most fortunate in meeting you."

"Why so, Messieurs?"

"A command from Madame."

"From Madame?" said De Guiche, looking surprised.

"Yes, Monsieur the Count, her royal Highness has been asking for you; you are to render account, she told us, of a commission you had to execute for her. Are you at liberty?"

"I am quite at her royal Highness's orders."

"Will you have the goodness to follow us, then?"

When De Guiche ascended to the princess's apartments, he found her pale and agitated. Montalais was standing at the door, apparently in some degree uneasy about what was passing in her mistress's mind. As De Guiche ap-

peared, "Ah! is that you, M. de Guiche?" said Madame; "pray come in. Mademoiselle de Montalais, I do not require your attendance any longer."

Montalais, more puzzled than ever, courtesied and withdrew; and De Guiche and the princess were left alone. The Count had every advantage in his favor; it was Madame who had summoned him to a rendezvous. But how was it possible for him to make use of this advantage? Madame was so whimsical, and her disposition was so changeable. She soon allowed this to be perceived, for, suddenly opening the conversation, she said, "Well! have you nothing to say to me?"

He imagined that she must have guessed his thoughts; he fancied, — for those who are in love are so constituted; they are as credulous and blind as poets or prophets, — he fancied that she knew how ardent was his desire to see her, and also the reason for it.

"Yes, Madame," he said; "and I think that affair very singular."

"The affair of the bracelets," she exclaimed eagerly, — "you mean that, I suppose?"

"Yes, Madame."

"And do you think that the king is in love? Tell me!"

De Guiche gave her a long and steady look; her eyes sank under his gaze, which seemed to read her very heart.

"I think," he said, "that the king may possibly have had the idea of annoying some one here. Were it not for that, the king would not show himself so earnest in his attentions as he is; he would not run the risk of compromising, from mere thoughtlessness of disposition, a young girl against whom no one has been hitherto able to say a word."

"Indeed! the bold, shameless girl!" said the princess, haughtily.

"I can positively assure your royal Highness," said De Guiche, with a respectful firmness, "that Mademoiselle de la Vallière is beloved by a man who merits every respect, for he is a brave and honorable gentleman."

"Bragelonne, perhaps?"

"My friend; yes, Madame."

"Well, and although he is your friend, what does that matter to the king?"

"The king knows that Bragelonne is affianced to Mademoiselle de la Vallière; and as Raoul has served the king most valiantly, the king will not inflict an irreparable injury upon him."

Madame began to laugh in a manner that produced a mournful impression upon De Guiche.

"I repeat, Madame, I do not believe that the king is in love with Mademoiselle de la Vallière; and the proof that I do not believe it is that I was about to ask you whose *amour propre* it is likely the king is, in this circumstance, desirous of wounding? You, who are well acquainted with the whole court, can perhaps assist me in ascertaining that; and assuredly with greater reason, too, since it is everywhere said that your royal Highness is on very intimate terms with the king."

Madame bit her lips, and, unable to assign any good and sufficient reasons, changed the conversation. "Prove to me," she said, fixing on him one of those looks in which the whole soul seems to pass into the eyes, — "prove to me that you intended to question me thus at the very moment I sent for you."

De Guiche gravely drew from his tablets what he had written, and showed it to her.

"Sympathy," she said.

"Yes," said the count, with a tenderness which he could not suppress, "sympathy. I have explained to you how

and why I sought you ; you, Madame, have yet to tell me why you sent for me."

"True," replied the princess. She hesitated, and then suddenly exclaimed, "Those bracelets will drive me mad!"

"You expected that the king would offer them to you," replied De Guiche.

"Why not?"

"But before you, Madame, before you, his sister-in-law, was there not the queen herself, to whom the king should have offered them?"

"Before La Vallière," cried the princess, wounded to the quick, "could he not have presented them to me? Was there not the whole court, indeed, to choose from?"

"I assure you, Madame," said the count, respectfully, "that if any one were to hear you speak in this manner, if any one were to see how red your eyes are, and, Heaven forgive me! to see, too, that tear trembling on your eyelids, it would be said that your royal Highness was jealous."

"Jealous!" said the princess, haughtily; "jealous of La Vallière!"

She expected to see De Guiche yield beneath her haughty gesture and her proud tone; but he boldly repeated, "Jealous of La Vallière; yes, Madame."

"Am I to suppose, Monsieur," she stammered, "that you suffer yourself to insult me?"

"Pray, do not suppose any such thing, Madame," replied the count, slightly agitated, but resolved to master that fiery nature.

"Leave the room!" said the princess, thoroughly exasperated; De Guiche's coolness and silent respect had made her completely lose her temper.

De Guiche fell back a step, made his obeisance slowly, drew himself up looking as white as his lace cuffs, and in

a voice slightly trembling, said, "It was hardly worth while to have hurried here to be subjected to this unmerited disgrace;" and he turned away deliberately.

He had scarcely taken half-a-dozen steps when Madame darted like a tigress after him, seized him by the cuff, and making him turn round again, said, trembling with passion as she did so: "The respect that you pretend to have is more insulting than the insult itself. Insult me, if you please, but at least speak!"

"And do you, Madame," said the count, gently, as he drew his sword, "thrust this sword into my heart rather than kill me by slow degrees!"

At the look he fixed upon her, — a look full of love, resolution, and despair even, — she knew how readily the man, so outwardly calm in appearance, would pass his sword through his own breast if she added another word. She tore the blade from his hands, and pressing his arm with a feverish impatience which might pass for tenderness, said: "Do not be too hard with me, Count! You see how I am suffering, and you have no pity for me."

Tears, which were the last crisis of the attack, smothered her voice. As soon as De Guiche saw her weep, he took her in his arms and carried her to an arm-chair; in another moment she was choking with sobs.

"Oh! why," he murmured, as he knelt by her side, "why do you conceal your troubles from me? Do you love any one? Tell me! It would kill me, I know, — but not until after I should have comforted, consoled, and even served you."

"And do you love me to that extent?" she replied, completely conquered.

"I do indeed love you to that extent, Madame."

She placed both her hands in his. "My heart is in-

deed another's," she murmured in so low a tone that her voice could hardly be heard; but he heard it, and said, —

"Is it the king you love?"

She gently shook her head; and her smile was like a clear bright streak in the clouds, through which, after the tempest had passed away, one almost fancies Paradise is opening. "But," she added, "there are other passions stirring in a high-born heart. Love is poetry; but the life of the heart is pride. Count, I was born upon a throne; I am proud and jealous of my rank. Why does the king gather such unworthy objects round him?"

"Once more, I repeat," said the count, "you are acting unjustly towards that poor girl, who will one day be my friend's wife."

"Are you simple enough to believe that, Count?"

"If I did not believe it," he said, turning very pale, "Bragelonne should be informed of it to-morrow; indeed he should, if I thought that poor La Vallière had forgotten the vows she had exchanged with Raoul. But no, it would be cowardly to betray any woman's secret; it would be criminal to disturb a friend's peace of mind.'

"You think, then," said the princess, with a wild burst of laughter, "that ignorance is happiness?"

"I believe it," he replied.

"Prove it to me, then," she said quickly.

"It is easily done, Madame. It is reported through the whole court that the king loves you, and that you return his affection."

"Well?" she said, breathing with difficulty.

"Well, suppose for a moment that Raoul, my friend, had come and said to me, 'Yes, the king loves Madame, and has made an impression upon her heart,' I possibly should have slain Raoul."

"It would have been necessary," said the princess, with

the obstinacy of a woman who feels herself not easily overcome, "for M. de Bragelonne to have had proofs, before he could venture to speak to you in that manner."

"It is, however, true," replied De Guiche, with a deep sigh, "that, not having been warned, I have learned nothing; and I now find that my ignorance has saved my life."

"So, then, you would drive your selfishness and coldness so far," said Madame, "that you would let this unhappy young man continue to love La Vallière?"

"I would, until La Vallière's guilt were revealed to me, Madame."

"But the bracelets?"

"Well, Madame, since you yourself expected to receive them from the king, what could I possibly have said?"

The argument was a telling one, and the princess was overwhelmed by it; and from that moment her defeat was assured. But as her heart and mind were instinct with noble and generous feelings, she understood De Guiche's extreme delicacy. She saw clearly that in his heart he really suspected that the king was in love with La Vallière, and that he did not wish to resort to the common expedient of ruining a rival in the mind of a woman, by giving the latter the assurance and certainty that this rival's affections were transferred to another woman. She guessed that his suspicions of La Vallière were aroused, and that, in order to leave himself time for his conviction to undergo a change, so as not to ruin her utterly, he was determined to pursue a certain straightforward line of conduct and gain a clearer understanding of affairs. She could read so much real greatness of character and such true generosity of disposition in her lover, that her heart seemed to warm with affection towards him, whose passion for her was so pure and delicate in its nature. Despite his fear of incurring her displeasure, De Guiche, by re-

taining his position as a man of proud independence of feeling and of deep devotion, became almost a hero in her estimation, and reduced her to the state of a jealous and small-minded woman. She loved him for it so tenderly that she could not refuse to give him a proof of her affection.

"See how many words we have wasted!" she said, taking his hand; "suspicions, anxieties, mistrust, sufferings, — I think we have mentioned all those words."

"Alas, Madame, yes."

"Efface them from your heart as I drive them from mine. Count, whether La Vallière does or does not love the king, and whether the king does or does not love La Vallière, we will make from this moment a distinction in our two rôles. You open your eyes so wide that I am sure you do not understand me."

"You are so impetuous, Madame, that I always tremble at the fear of displeasing you."

"And see how he trembles now, poor fellow!" she said, with the most charming playfulness of manner. "Yes, Monsieur, I have two parts to perform. I am the sister of the king, the sister-in-law of the king's wife. In this character ought I not to take an interest in these domestic intrigues? Come, tell me what you think!"

"As little as possible, Madame."

"Agreed, Monsieur! But it is a question of dignity; and then, you know, I am the wife of the king's brother." De Guiche sighed. "A circumstance," she added, with an expression of great tenderness, "which will remind you that I am always to be treated with the profoundest respect." De Guiche fell at her feet, which he kissed with the religious fervor of a worshipper. "And I begin to think," she murmured, "that, really and truly, I have another part to perform. I was almost forgetting it."

"Name it, oh, name it!"

"I am a woman," she said, in a voice lower than ever, "and I love." He rose; she opened her arms, and their lips were pressed together. A footstep was heard behind the tapestry, and Montalais knocked.

"What is it, Mademoiselle?" said Madame.

"M. de Guiche is wanted," replied Montalais, who was just in time to see the agitation of the actors of these four rôles; for De Guiche had constantly carried out his part with the greatest heroism.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MONTALAIS AND MALICORNE.

MONTALAIS was right. M. de Guiche, summoned in every direction, was very much exposed, even from the multiplicity of affairs, to the risk of not answering to any of them. Madame, notwithstanding her wounded pride and her secret anger, could not, for the moment at least, reproach Montalais for having violated in so bold a manner the semi-royal order with which she had been dismissed. De Guiche also lost his presence of mind, or it would be better to say that he had already lost it before Montalais's arrival; for scarcely had he heard the young girl's voice, when, without taking leave of Madame, — as the most ordinary politeness required, even between persons equal in rank and station, — he fled from her presence, his heart tumultuously throbbing, and his brain on fire, leaving the princess with one hand raised, as though about to bid him adieu. De Guiche could say, as Chérubin said a hundred years later, that he bore away on his lips happiness enough to last an eternity. Montalais was at no loss, therefore, to perceive the agitation of the two lovers; the one who fled was agitated, and the one who remained was equally so.

"So, so," murmured the young girl, as she glanced inquisitively round her, "this time, at least, I think I know as much as the most curious woman could possibly wish to know." Madame felt so embarrassed by this inquisitorial look, that, as if she had heard Montalais's side-remark,

she did not speak a word to her maid of honor, but casting down her eyes retired at once to her bedroom.

Montalais, observing this, stood listening for a moment, and then heard Madame lock and bolt her door. By this she knew that the rest of the evening was at her own disposal; and making behind the door which had just been closed a rather disrespectful gesture which might mean "Good-night, Princess," she went down the staircase in search of Malicorne, who was very busily engaged at that moment in watching a courier who, covered with dust, had just left the Comte de Guiche's apartments. Montalais knew that Malicorne was engaged in a matter of some importance; she therefore allowed him to look and stretch out his neck as much as he pleased, and it was only when he had resumed his natural position that she touched him on the shoulder.

"Well," said Montalais, "what is the news?"

"M. de Guiche is in love with Madame," said Malicorne.

"Fine news, truly! I know something more recent than that."

"Well, what do you know?"

"That Madame is in love with M. de Guiche."

"The one is the consequence of the other."

"Not always, my good Monsieur."

"Is that remark intended for me?"

"Persons present are always excepted."

"Thank you," said Malicorne. "Well, and in the other direction what is there fresh?"

"The king wished, this evening, after the lottery, to see Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"Well, and he has seen her?"

"No, indeed."

"What do you mean by that?"

"The door was shut and locked."

"So that —"

"So that the king was obliged to go back again, looking very sheepish, like a simple-minded thief who has forgotten his implements."

"Good!"

"And in the third direction," inquired Montalais.

"The courier who has just arrived for M. de Guiche came from M. de Bragelonne."

"Excellent!" said Montalais, clapping her hands together.

"Why so?"

"Because we shall have occupation. If we get weary now, something unfortunate will be sure to happen."

"We must divide the work, then," said Malicorne, "in order to avoid confusion."

"Nothing easier," replied Montalais. "Three intrigues, carefully nursed and carefully encouraged, will produce, one with another, and taking a low average, three love-letters a day."

"Oh!" exclaimed Malicorne, shrugging his shoulders, "you cannot mean what you say, darling, three letters a day, — that may do for sentimental common people. A musketeer on duty, a young girl in a convent, may exchange letters with their lovers once a day, perhaps, from the top of a ladder or through a hole in the wall. A letter contains all the poetry their poor little hearts have to boast of. But here, — oh, you little know royal affection, my dear!"

"Well, finish!" said Montalais, out of patience with him. "Some one may come."

"Finish! Why, I am only at the beginning. I have still three points as yet untouched."

"Upon my word, he will be the death of me, with his Flemish indifference!" exclaimed Montalais.

"And you will drive me mad with your Italian vivacity! I was going to say that our lovers here will be writing volumes to each other. But what are you driving at?"

"At this. Not one of our lady correspondents will be able to keep the letters she may receive."

"Very likely not."

"M. de Guiche will not be able to keep his, either."

"That is probable."

"Very well, then; I will take care of all that."

"That is the very thing which is impossible," said Malicorne.

"Why so?"

"Because you are not your own mistress,—your room is as much La Vallière's as yours, and there are certain persons who will think nothing of visiting and searching a maid of honor's room; because I am terribly afraid of the queen, who is as jealous as a Spaniard; of the queen-mother, who is as jealous as a couple of Spaniards; and, last of all, of Madame herself, who has jealousy enough for ten Spaniards."

"You forget some one else?"

"Who?"

"Monsieur."

"I was only speaking of the women. Let us add them up, then: we will call Monsieur, No. 1; No. 2, De Guiche; No. 3, the Vicomte de Bragelonne; No. 4, the king."

"The king?"

"Of course, the king, who not only will be more jealous, but still more powerful than all the rest put together. Ah, my dear!"

"Well?"

"Into what a wasp's nest you have thrust yourself!"

"And as yet not quite far enough, if you will follow me into it."

"Most certainly I will follow you. Yet — "

"Well, yet — "

"While we have time enough left, I think it will be more prudent to turn back."

"But I, on the contrary, think the most prudent course to take is to put ourselves at once at the head of all these intrigues."

"You will never be able to do it."

"With you, I could carry on ten of them. I am in my element, you must know. I was born to live at the court, as the salamander is made to live in the fire."

"Your comparison does not reassure me in the slightest degree in the world, my dear Montalais. I have heard it said, and by very learned men too, that, in the first place, there are no salamanders at all, and that if there were any, they would be perfectly roasted on leaving the fire."

"Your learned men may be very wise so far as salamanders are concerned, but your learned men would never tell you what I can tell you ; namely, that Aure de Montalais is destined, before a month is over, to become the first diplomat in the Court of France."

"Be it so; but on condition that I shall be the second."

"Agreed ; an offensive and defensive alliance, of course."

"Only be very careful of any letters."

"I will hand them to you as fast as I receive them."

"What shall we tell the king about Madame?"

"That Madame is still in love with his Majesty."

"What shall we tell Madame about the king?"

"That she would be exceedingly wrong not to humor him."

"What shall we tell La Vallière about Madame?"

"Whatever we choose, for La Vallière is in our power."

"How so?"

"In two ways."

"What do you mean?"

"In the first place, through the Vicomte de Bragelonne."

"Explain yourself?"

"You do not forget, I hope, that M. de Bragelonne has written many letters to Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"I forget nothing."

"Well, then, it was I who received, and I who kept, those letters."

"And, consequently, it is you who have them still?"

"Yes."

"Where, — here?"

"Oh, no; I have them safe at Blois, in the little room you know well enough."

"That dear little room, that darling little room, the antechamber of the palace I intend you to live in one of these days. But I beg your pardon, you said that all those letters are in that little room?"

"Yes."

"Did you not put them in a box?"

"Of course; in the same box where I put all the letters I received from you, and where I put mine also when your business or your amusements prevented you from coming to our rendezvous."

"Ah, very good!" said Malicorne.

"Why are you so satisfied?"

"Because I see that there is a possibility of not having to run to Blois after the letters, for I have them here."

"You have brought the box away?"

"It was very dear to me because it belonged to you."

"Be sure to take care of it, for it contains original documents which will be of very great value by and by."

"I am perfectly well aware of that, indeed; and that is the very reason why I laugh as I do, and with all my heart too."

"And now, one last word."

"Why the last?"

"Do we need any one to assist us?"

"No one at all."

"Valets or maid-servants?"

"Bad, — detestable! You will give the letters, you will receive them. Oh! we must have no pride in this affair; otherwise M. Malicorne and Mademoiselle Aure, not transacting their own affairs themselves, will have to make up their minds to see them transacted by others."

"You are quite right; but what is going on yonder in M. de Guiche's room?"

"Nothing; he is only opening his window."

"Let us be gone;" and they both immediately disappeared, all the terms of the compact having been agreed upon.

The window, which had just been opened, was, in fact, that of the Comte de Guiche. But it was not, as uninformed persons may think, alone with the hope of catching a glimpse of Madame through her curtains that he seated himself by the open window, for his preoccupation of mind was not wholly due to love. He had just received, as we have already stated, the courier who had been despatched to him by De Bragelonne, the latter having written to De Guiche a letter which had made the deepest impression upon him, and which he had read over and over again. "Strange, strange!" he murmured. "How powerful are the means by which destiny hurries men on towards their fate!" and leaving the window in order to

approach nearer to the light, he again read over the letter which he had just received, whose lines seemed to burn through his eyes into his brain.

CALAIS.

MY DEAR COUNT, — I found M. de Wardes at Calais; he has been seriously wounded in an affair with the Duke of Buckingham. De Wardes is, as you know, unquestionably brave, but full of malevolent and wicked feelings. He conversed with me about yourself, for whom he says he has a warm regard; and also about Madame, whom he considers a beautiful and amiable woman. He has guessed your affection for a certain person. He also talked to me about the person whom I love, and showed the greatest interest on my behalf in expressing a deep pity for me, accompanied, however, by dark hints which alarmed me at first, but which I at last looked upon as the result of his usual love of mystery. These are the facts: He had received news of the court; you will understand, however, that it was only through M. de Lorraine. The report is, so says the news, that a change has taken place in the king's affections. You know whom that concerns. In the second place, the news continues, people are talking about one of the maids of honor, respecting whom various slanderous reports are being circulated. These vague phrases have not allowed me to sleep. I have been deploring, ever since yesterday, that my diffidence and vacillation of purpose should, notwithstanding a certain obstinacy of character I may possess, have left me unable to reply to these insinuations. In a word, therefore, M. de Wardes was setting off for Paris, and I did not delay his departure with explanations; for it seemed rather hard, I confess, to cross-examine a man whose wounds are hardly yet closed. In short, he was to travel by short stages, as he was anxious to leave, he said, in order to be present at a curious spectacle which the court cannot fail to offer within a very short time. He added a few congratulatory words, accompanied by certain sympathizing expressions. I could not understand the one any more than the other; I was bewildered by my own thoughts, and by a mistrust of this man, —

a mistrust which, as you know better than any one else, I have never been able to overcome. As soon as he left, my perception seemed to become clearer. It is hardly possible that a man of De Wardes's character should not have communicated something of his own malicious nature to the statements he made to me. Yet it is impossible that in the mysterious hints which he threw out in my presence there should not be some mysterious signification, which I might apply to myself or to some one with whom you are acquainted. Being compelled to leave as soon as possible, in obedience to the king's commands, the idea did not occur to me of running after M. de Wardes in order to obtain an explanation of his reserve; but I have despatched a courier to you with this letter, which will explain in detail all my various doubts. I regard you as myself. It is I who have thought, and it will be for you to act. M. de Wardes will arrive very shortly; endeavor to learn what he meant, if you do not already know it. M. de Wardes, moreover, pretended that the Duke of Buckingham left Paris crowned with Madame's love. This was an affair which would have unhesitatingly made me draw my sword, had I not felt that I was under the necessity of despatching the king's mission before undertaking any quarrel. Burn this letter, which Olivain will hand you. Whatever Olivain says you may confidently rely upon. Will you have the goodness, my dear count, to recall me to the remembrance of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, whose hand I kiss with the greatest respect.

Your devoted

VICOMTE DE BRAGELONNE.

P. S. If anything serious should happen, — we should be prepared for everything, my dear friend, — despatch a courier to me with this single word, "Come," and I shall be in Paris within six-and-thirty hours after I shall have received your letter.

De Guiche sighed, folded the letter up a third time, and instead of burning it, as Raoul had recommended him to do, placed it in his pocket. He felt that he needed to read it over and over again.

"How much distress of mind, and yet how great a confidence, he shows!" murmured the count. "Raoul has poured out his whole soul in this letter. He forgets to mention the Comte de la Fère, and speaks of his respect for Louise. He cautions me on my account, and entreats me on his own. Ah!" continued De Guiche, with a threatening gesture, "you interfere in my affairs, M. de Wardes, do you? Very well, then; I shall now occupy myself with yours. And for you, poor Raoul, — you who intrust your heart to my keeping, — be assured that I will watch over it."

With this promise, De Guiche sent to beg Malicorne to come immediately to his apartments, if it were possible. Malicorne complied with the invitation with an activity which was the first result of his conversation with Montalais. And while De Guiche, who thought that his motive was undiscovered, cross-examined Malicorne, the latter, who appeared to be working in the dark, soon guessed his questioner's motives. The consequence was that after a quarter of an hour's conversation, during which De Guiche thought that he had ascertained the whole truth with regard to La Vallière and the king, he had learned absolutely nothing more than his own eyes had already acquainted him with; while Malicorne learned or guessed that Raoul, who was absent, was fast becoming suspicious, and that De Guiche intended to watch over the treasure of the Hesperides. Malicorne accepted the office of dragon. De Guiche fancied that he had done everything for his friend, and soon began to think of nothing but his own personal affairs. The next evening, De Wardes's return and his first appearance at the king's reception were announced. When that visit had been paid, the convalescent waited on Monsieur; De Guiche taking care, however, to be at Monsieur's apartments before the visit took place

CHAPTER XIX.

HOW DE WARDES WAS RECEIVED AT COURT.

Monsieur had welcomed De Wardes with that marked favor which all light and frivolous minds bestow on every novelty that may come in their way. De Wardes, whom indeed he had not seen for a month, was like fresh fruit to him. To treat him with marked kindness was an infidelity to his old friends, and there is always something fascinating in that; moreover, it was a sort of reparation to De Wardes himself. Nothing, consequently, could exceed the favorable notice Monsieur took of him. The Chevalier de Lorraine, who feared this rival not a little, but who respected a character and disposition which were precisely parallel to his own in every particular, with the addition of a courage which he did not himself possess, received De Wardes with a greater display of regard and affection than even Monsieur had shown. De Guiche, as we have said, was there also, but kept a little in the background, waiting very patiently until all these embraces were over.

De Wardes, while talking to the others, and even to Monsieur himself, had not for a moment lost sight of De Guiche, who he instinctively felt was there on his account. As soon as he had finished with the others, he went up to De Guiche. They both exchanged the most courteous compliments, after which De Wardes returned to Monsieur and to the other gentlemen.

In the midst of these congratulations on a happy return,

Madame was announced. She had been informed of De Wardes's arrival, and knowing all the details of his voyage and of his duel with Buckingham, was not sorry to be present to hear the remarks which she knew would be made without delay by one who she felt assured was her personal enemy. Two or three of her ladies accompanied her.

De Wardes saluted Madame in the most graceful and respectful manner, and, as a beginning of hostilities, announced, first of all, that he could furnish the Duke of Buckingham's friends with the latest news about him. This was a direct answer to the coldness with which Madame had received him. The attack was a vigorous one; and Madame felt the blow, but did not appear to have even noticed it. He rapidly cast a glance at Monsieur and at De Guiche; the former had colored, and the latter had turned very pale. Madame alone preserved an unmoved countenance; but as she knew how many unpleasant thoughts and feelings her enemy could awaken in the two persons who were listening to him, she smilingly bent forward towards the traveller, as if to listen to the news he had brought. But he was speaking of other matters. Madame was brave, even to imprudence. If she were to retreat, it would be inviting an attack; so, after the first disagreeable impression had passed away, she returned to the charge.

"Have you suffered much from your wounds, M. de Wardes?" she inquired; "for we have been told that you had the misfortune to be wounded."

It was now De Wardes's turn to wince. He bit his lips, and replied, "No, Madame, hardly at all."

"And yet in this terribly hot weather —"

"The sea-breezes are fresh and cool, Madame; and then I had one consolation."

"Indeed! What was it?"

"The knowledge that my adversary's sufferings were still greater than my own."

"Ah! you mean that he was more seriously wounded than you were? I was not aware of that," said the princess, with utter indifference.

"Oh, Madame, you are mistaken, or rather you pretend to misunderstand my remark. I did not say that he was suffering more in body than myself; but his heart was seriously affected."

De Guiche comprehended in what direction the struggle was tending; he ventured to make a sign to Madame, as if entreating her to retire from the contest. But she, without acknowledging De Guiche's gesture, without showing that she had noticed it even, and still smiling, continued, "Is it possible," she said, "that the Duke of Buckingham's heart was touched? I had no idea, until now, that a heart-wound could be cured."

"Alas! Madame," replied De Wardes, politely, "every woman believes that; and it is that belief which gives them over us the superiority of confidence."

"You misunderstand altogether, dearest," said the prince, impatiently. "M. de Wardes means that the Duke of Buckingham's heart had been touched, not by a sword, but by something else."

"Ah, very good, very good!" exclaimed Madame. "It is a jest of M. de Wardes's. Very good, but I should like to know if the Duke of Buckingham would relish the jest. It is, indeed, a very great pity that he is not here, M. de Wardes."

The young man's eyes seemed to flash fire. "Oh," he said, as he clinched his teeth, "there is nothing I should like better!"

De Guiche did not move. Madame seemed to expect

that he would come to her assistance. Monsieur hesitated. The Chevalier de Lorraine advanced and took up the conversation.

"Madame," he said, "De Wardes knows perfectly well that for a Buckingham's heart to be touched is nothing new; and what he has said has already taken place."

"Instead of an ally, I have two enemies," murmured Madame, — "two determined enemies, and in league with each other," and she changed the conversation. To change the conversation is, as every one knows, a right possessed by princes which etiquette requires all to respect. The remainder of the conversation was moderate enough in its tone; the principal actors had finished their parts.

Madame withdrew early; and Monsieur, who wished to question her on several matters, offered her his hand on leaving. The chevalier was seriously afraid that a good understanding might be established between the husband and wife if he were to leave them quietly together. He therefore made his way to Monsieur's apartments, in order to surprise him on his return, and to destroy with a few words all the good impressions that Madame might have been able to sow in his heart.

De Guiche advanced towards De Wardes, who was surrounded by a large number of persons, and thereby indicated his wish to converse with him. De Wardes at the same time showed, by his looks and by a movement of his head, that he perfectly understood him. There was nothing in these signs to enable strangers to suppose that they were not upon the most friendly footing. De Guiche could therefore turn away from him, and wait until he was at liberty. He had not long to wait, — for De Wardes, freed from his questioners, approached De Guiche; and both of them, after a fresh salutation, began to walk side by side together.

"You have made a good impression since your return, my dear De Wardes," said the count.

"Excellent, as you see."

"And your spirits are just as lively as ever?"

"More than ever."

"That is great good fortune."

"Why not? Everything is so ridiculous in this world, everything is so absurd around us."

"You are right."

"You are of my opinion, then?"

"I should think so! And what news do you bring us from yonder?"

"I? None at all. I have come to look for news here."

"But, tell me, you surely must have seen some people at Boulogne, — one of our friends, for instance; it is not a long time ago."

"Some people, — one of our friends — "

"You have a short memory."

"Ah! true; Bragelonne, you mean."

"Exactly so."

"Who was on his way to fulfil a mission to King Charles."

"Precisely. Well, then, did he not tell you, or did you not tell him — "

"I do not exactly know what I told him, I must confess; but I do know what I did not tell him."

De Wardes was cunning itself. He perfectly well knew from De Guiche's tone and manner, which was cold and dignified, that the conversation was about to assume a disagreeable turn. He resolved to let it take what course it pleased, and to keep strictly on his guard.

"May I ask what it was you did not tell him?" inquired De Guiche.

"Well, that about La Vallière."

"La Vallière — What is it? and what is that strange circumstance you seem to have known out yonder, with which Bragelonne, who was here on the spot, was not acquainted?"

'Do you really ask me that in a serious manner?"

"Nothing can be more so."

"What! you, a member of the court, living in Madame's household, a friend of Monsieur, a guest at their table, the favorite of our lovely princess!"

De Guiche colored violently from anger. "To what princess are you alluding?" he said.

"I am only acquainted with one, my dear fellow. I am speaking of Madame herself. Are you devoted to another princess, then? Come, tell me!"

De Guiche was on the point of launching out, but he saw the drift of the remark. A quarrel was imminent between the two young men. De Wardes wished the quarrel to be only in Madame's name, while De Guiche would not accept it except on La Vallière's account. From this moment it became a series of feigned attacks, which would continue until one of the two had been touched home. De Guiche therefore resumed all his self-possession.

"There is not the slightest question in the world of Madame in this matter, my dear De Wardes," said De Guiche, "but simply of what you were talking about just now."

"What was I saying?"

"That you had concealed certain things from M. de Bragelonne."

"Certain things which you know as well as I do," replied De Wardes.

"No, upon my honor!"

"Nonsense!"

"If you tell me what it is, I shall know, but not otherwise, I swear."

"What! I, who have just arrived from a distance of sixty leagues, and you, who have not stirred from this place, who have witnessed with your own eyes that of which rumor informed me at Calais, — do I understand you to tell me seriously that you do not know what it is about? Oh, Count, this is hardly charitable of you!"

"As you like, De Wardes; but I repeat, I know nothing."

"You are very discreet, — well, it is prudent."

"And so you will not tell me anything, — will not tell me any more than you told Bragelonne?"

"You are pretending to be deaf, I see. I am convinced that Madame could not possibly have more command over herself than you have over yourself."

"Double hypocrite!" murmured De Guiche, "there you are again returning to your own subject!"

"Very well, then," continued De Wardes, "since we find it so difficult to understand each other about La Vallière and Bragelonne, let us speak about your own affairs."

"Nay," said De Guiche, "I have no affairs of my own to talk about. You have not said anything about me, I suppose, to Bragelonne, which you cannot repeat to myself."

"No; but understand me, De Guiche, that however much I may be ignorant of certain matters, I am quite as conversant with others. If, for instance, we were conversing about certain intimacies of the Duke of Buckingham at Paris, as I did during my journey with the duke, I could tell you a great many interesting circumstances. Would you like me to mention them?"

De Guiche passed his hand across his forehead, which was covered with perspiration. "Why, no," he said, "a

hundred times no! I have no curiosity for matters which do not concern me. The Duke of Buckingham is nothing more than a simple acquaintance, while Raoul is an intimate friend. I have not the slightest curiosity to learn what happened to the Duke of Buckingham, while I have, on the contrary, the greatest interest in learning what happened to Raoul."

"At Paris?"

"Yes, at Paris or at Boulogne. You understand, I am on the spot, — if anything should happen, I am here to meet it; while Raoul is absent, and has only myself to represent him: so Raoul's affairs before my own."

"But Raoul will return."

"Yes, when his mission is completed. In the mean time, you understand, evil reports cannot be permitted to circulate about him without my looking into them."

"And the more occasion, since he will remain some time in London," said De Wardes, chuckling.

"You think so?" asked De Guiche, simply.

"Think so, indeed! Do you suppose that he was sent to London for no other purpose than to go there and return again immediately? No, no; he was sent to London to remain there."

"Ah, Count!" said De Guiche, seizing De Wardes's hand violently, "that is a very serious suspicion concerning Bragelonne, which completely confirms what he wrote to me from Boulogne."

De Wardes resumed his former coldness of manner. His love of raillery had led him too far, and by his own imprudence he had laid himself open to attack. "Well, tell me, what did he write to you about?" he inquired.

"He told me that you had artfully insinuated some injurious remarks against La Vallière, and that you had

seemed to laugh at his great confidence in that young girl."

"Well, it is perfectly true that I did so," said De Wardes, "and I was quite ready at the time to hear from the Vicomte de Bragelonne that which every man expects another to say whenever anything may have been said to displease him. In the same way, for instance, if I were seeking a quarrel with you I should tell you that Madame, after having shown the greatest preference for the Duke of Buckingham, is at this moment supposed to have sent the handsome duke away for your benefit."

"Oh, that would not wound me in the slightest degree, my dear De Wardes!" said De Guiche, smiling, notwithstanding the shiver which ran through his whole frame. "Why, such a favor as that would be too great a happiness."

"I admit that. But if I absolutely wished to quarrel with you I should try to invent a falsehood perhaps, and should speak to you about a certain grove where you and that illustrious princess were together, — I should speak also of certain genuflections, of certain kissings of the hand; and you, who are so secret on all occasions, so hasty and punctilious — "

"Well," said De Guiche, interrupting him, with the same smile upon his lips, although he felt almost as if he were going to die, "I swear I should not care for that, nor should I in any way contradict you; for you must know, my dear count, that in all matters which concern myself I am a block of ice. But it is a very different thing when an absent friend is concerned, — a friend who on leaving confided his interests to my safe-keeping; for such a friend, De Wardes, believe me, I am like fire itself."

"I understand you, M. de Guiche; but in spite of what you say, there cannot be any question between us just

now, either of Bragelonne or of this insignificant young girl, whose name is La Vallière."

At this moment some of the younger courtiers were crossing the apartment, and having already heard the few words which had just been pronounced, were able also to hear those which were about to follow. De Wardes observed this, and continued aloud: "Oh! if La Vallière were a coquette like Madame, whose very innocent flirtations, I am sure, were, first of all, the cause of the Duke of Buckingham's being sent to England, and afterwards were the reason of your being sent into exile, you — for you will not deny, I suppose, that Madame's seductive manners did have a certain influence over you —"

The courtiers drew nearer to the two speakers; De Saint-Aignan at their head, and then Manicamp.

"But, my dear fellow, whose fault was that?" said De Guiche, laughing. "I am a vain, conceited fellow, I know, and everybody else knows it too. I took seriously that which was intended only as a jest, and I got myself exiled for my pains. But I saw my error. I overcame my vanity, and I obtained my recall by making the *amende honorable*, and by promising myself to overcome this defect; and the consequence is that I am so thoroughly cured that I now laugh at the very thing which three or four days ago would have almost broken my heart. But Raoul is in love, and is loved in return; he cannot laugh at the reports which disturb his happiness, — reports which you seem to have undertaken to interpret, when you knew, Count, as I do, as those gentlemen do, as every one does in fact, that these reports were pure calumny."

"Calumny!" exclaimed De Wardes, furious at seeing himself caught in the snare by De Guiche's coolness of temper.

"Certainly, a calumny. Look at this letter from him,

in which he tells me you have spoken ill of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and asks me if what you said about this young girl be true. Do you wish me to appeal to these gentlemen, De Wardes, to decide?" and with the greatest coolness De Guiche read aloud the part of the letter which referred to La Vallière. "And now," continued De Guiche, "I have not the least doubt in the world that you wished to disturb Bragelonne's peace of mind, and that your remarks were maliciously intended."

De Wardes looked round him to see whether he could find support from any one; but at the idea that De Wardes had insulted, either directly or indirectly, the idol of the day, every one shook his head, and De Wardes saw that there was no one present who would have refused to say that he was in the wrong.

"Messieurs," said De Guiche, intuitively divining the general feeling, "my discussion with M. de Wardes refers to a subject so delicate in its nature that it is most important that no one should hear more than you have already heard. Close the doors then, I beg you, and let us finish our conversation in the manner which becomes two gentlemen, one of whom has given the other the lie."

"Messieurs, Messieurs!" exclaimed those who were present.

"Is it your opinion, then, that I was wrong in defending Mademoiselle de la Vallière?" said De Guiche. "In that case I pass judgment upon myself, and am ready to withdraw the offensive words which I may have used to M. de Wardes."

"*Peste!* certainly not!" said De Saint-Aignan. "Mademoiselle de la Vallière is an angel."

"Virtue and purity itself," said Manicamp.

"You see, M. de Wardes," said De Guiche, "that I am not the only one who undertakes the defence of that poor

girl. I entreat you, therefore, Messieurs, a second time, to leave us. You see that it is impossible that we could be more calm and composed than we are."

The courtiers asked nothing better than to go away. Some went out at one door, and the rest at another; and the two young men were left alone.

"Well played," said De Wardes to the count.

"Was it not?" replied the latter.

"What can you expect, my dear fellow? I have got quite rusty in the country, while the command you have acquired over yourself, Count, confounds me. A man always gains something in woman's society; so pray accept my congratulations."

"I accept them."

"And I will make Madame a present of them."

"Oh! now, my dear M. de Wardes, let us speak of her as loudly as you please."

"Do not defy me!"

"Oh! I defy you! You are known to be an evil-minded man; if you do that, you will be looked upon as a coward too, and Monsieur will have you hanged, this evening, at his window-casement. Speak, my dear De Wardes, speak!"

"I have fought already."

"But not quite enough yet."

"I see that you would not be sorry to beat me soundly."

"No; better still!"

"The deuce! you are unfortunate in the moment you have chosen, my dear count. A duel, after the one I have just fought, would hardly suit me. I have lost too much blood at Boulogne; at the slightest effort my wounds would open again, and you would really have too good a bargain with me."

"True," said De Guiche; "and yet, on your arrival here, your looks and your arms showed that there was nothing the matter with you."

"Yes, my arms are all right, but my legs are weak. And then, I have not had a foil in my hand since that devil of a duel; while you, I will answer for it, have been fencing every day, in order to carry your little conspiracy against me to a successful issue."

"Upon my honor, Monsieur," replied De Guiche, "it is six months since I last practised."

"No, Count, after due deliberation, I will not fight, at least with you. I shall await Bragelonne's return, since you say that it is Bragelonne who has fault to find with me."

"Oh, no, indeed! You shall not wait until Bragelonne's return," exclaimed De Guiche, losing all command over himself, "for you have said that it might possibly be some time before Bragelonne returns, and in the mean while your wicked insinuations will have had their effect."

"Yet I shall have my excuse; so take care!"

"I will give you a week to finish your recovery."

"That is better. In a week we will see."

"Yes, yes, I understand; a week will give time to my adversary to make his escape. No, no; I will not give you one day, even."

"You are mad, Monsieur," said De Wardes, retreating a step.

"And you are a coward, if you do not fight willingly. Nay, what is more, I will denounce you to the king, as having refused to fight after having insulted La Vallière."

"Ah!" said De Wardes, "you are dangerously treacherous, though you pass for a man of honor."

"There is nothing more dangerous than the treachery of the man whose conduct is always loyal and upright."

"Restore me the use of my legs, then, or get yourself bled, till you are as white as I am, so as to equalize our chances."

"No, no; I have something better than that to propose."

"What is it?"

"We will mount on horseback, and will exchange three pistol-shots each. You are a first-rate marksman. I have seen you bring down swallows with single balls, and at full gallop. Do not deny it, for I have seen you myself."

"I believe you are right," said De Wardes; "and as that is the case, it is not unlikely I might kill you."

"You would be rendering me a very great service, if you did."

"I will do my best."

"Is it agreed?"

"Give me your hand upon it."

"There it is, — but on one condition, however."

"Name it."

"That not a word shall be said about it to the king."

"Not a word, I swear."

"I shall go and get my horse, then."

"And I, mine."

"Where shall we meet?"

"In the open plain; I know an admirable place."

"Shall we go together?"

"Why not?"

Both of them, on their way to the stables, passed beneath Madame's windows, which were faintly lighted; a shadow could be seen on the lace curtains.

"There is a woman," said De Wardes, smiling, "who does not suspect that we are going to fight — to die, perhaps — on her account."

CHAPTER XX.

THE COMBAT.

De Wardes and De Guiche selected their horses, and then saddled them with their own hands with holster saddles. De Wardes had no pistols, so De Guiche, having two pairs of them, went to his rooms to get them, and after having loaded them, gave the choice to De Wardes, who selected the pair he had made use of twenty times before, — the same, indeed, with which De Guiche had seen him kill swallows flying. "You will not be surprised," he said, "if I take every precaution. You know the weapons well, and consequently I am only making the chances equal."

"Your remark was quite useless," replied De Guiche, "and you have done no more than you are entitled to do."

"Now," said De Wardes, "I beg you to have the goodness to help me to mount; for I still experience a little difficulty in doing so."

"In that case it would be better to settle the matter on foot."

"No; once in the saddle, I shall be all right."

"Very good, then; say no more," said De Guiche, as he assisted De Wardes to mount his horse.

"And now," continued De Wardes, "in our eagerness to kill each other, we have neglected one circumstance."

"What is that?"

"That it is quite dark, and we shall almost be obliged to grope about, in order to kill each other."

"Well, the result will be the same."

"Moreover, we must observe one thing more, that men of honor do not go out to fight without companions."

"Oh!" said De Guiche, "you are as anxious as I am that everything should be done in proper order"

"Yes; but I do not wish people to say that you have assassinated me, any more than, supposing I were to kill you, I should myself like to be accused of such a crime."

"Did any one make a similar remark about your duel with the Duke of Buckingham?" said De Guiche; "it took place under precisely the same conditions as ours."

"Very true, but there was still light enough to see by, and we were up to our middles almost in the water; besides, there were a good number of spectators on shore, looking at us."

De Guiche reflected for a moment; and the thought which had already presented itself to him became more confirmed, — that De Wardes wished to have witnesses present, in order to bring back the conversation about Madame, and to give a new turn to the combat. He did not say a word in reply, therefore; and as De Wardes once more looked at him interrogatively, he replied, by a movement of the head, that it would be best to let things remain as they were.

The two adversaries consequently set off, and left the château by the gate close to which we may remember to have seen Montalais and Malicorne together. The night, as if to counteract the extreme heat of the day, had gathered the clouds together in masses which were moving slowly and silently along from the west to the east. The vault above, without a clear spot anywhere visible or without the faintest indication of thunder, seemed to hang heavily over the earth, and soon began, by the force of

the wind, to be split up into fragments, like a huge sheet torn into shreds. Large and warm drops of rain began to fall heavily, and gathered the dust into globules, which rolled along the ground. At the same time the hedges, which seemed conscious of the approaching storm, the thirsty plants, the drooping branches of the trees, exhaled a thousand aromatic odors, which revived in the mind tender recollections, thoughts of youth, eternal life, happiness, and love.

"How fresh the earth smells!" said De Wardes; "it is a piece of coquetry of hers to draw us to her."

"By the by," replied De Guiche, "several ideas have just occurred to me, and I wish to have your opinion upon them."

"Relative to —"

"Relative to our engagement."

"It is quite time, it seems to me, that we should begin to arrange matters."

"Is it to be an ordinary combat, and conducted according to established custom?"

"Let me first know what your established custom is."

"That we dismount in any particular plain that may suit us, fasten our horses to the nearest object, meet each without our pistols in our hands, then retire for a hundred and fifty paces, in order to advance on each other."

"Very good; that is precisely the way in which I killed poor Follivent, three weeks ago, at St. Denis."

"I beg your pardon, but you forget one circumstance."

"What is that?"

"That in your duel with Follivent you advanced towards each other on foot, your swords between your teeth and your pistols in your hands."

"True."

"While now, on the contrary, as you cannot walk, — you yourself admit that, — we shall have to mount our horses again, and charge; and the first who wishes to fire will do so."

"That is the best course, no doubt; but it is quite dark. We must make allowance for more missed shots than would be the case in the daytime."

"Very well; each will fire three times, — the pair of pistols already loaded, and one reload."

"Excellent! Where shall our engagement take place?"

"Have you any preference?"

"No."

"You see that small wood which lies before us?"

"The wood which is called Rochin? Certainly."

"You know it, then?"

"Perfectly."

"You know, then, that there is an open glade in the centre?"

"Yes."

"Well, this glade is a natural arena, with a variety of roads, by-places, paths, ditches, windings, and avenues. We could not find a better spot."

"I am perfectly satisfied, if you are so. We have arrived, if I am not mistaken."

"Yes. Look at the beautiful open space in the centre. The faint light which the stars afford, as Corneille says, seems concentrated in this spot; the woods which surround it seem, with their barriers, to form its natural limits."

"Very good. Do, then, as you say."

"Let us first settle the conditions."

"These are mine; if you have any objection to make you will state it."

"I am listening."

"If the horse be killed, its rider will be obliged to fight on foot."

"That is a matter of course, since we have no change of horses here."

"But that does not oblige his adversary to dismount."

"His adversary will be free to act as he likes."

"The adversaries, having once met in close contact, cannot withdraw again, and may consequently fire muzzle to muzzle."

"Agreed."

"Three shots and no more."

"Quite sufficient, I think. Here are powder and balls for your pistols. Measure out three charges, take three balls; I will do the same. Then we will throw the rest of the powder and the balls away."

"And we will solemnly swear," said De Wardes, "that we have neither balls nor powder about us?"

"Agreed; and I swear it," said De Guiche, holding his hand towards heaven, — a gesture which De Wardes imitated.

"And now, my dear count," said De Wardes, "allow me to tell you that I am in no way your dupe. You are, or soon will be, the accepted lover of Madame. I have detected your secret, and you are afraid I shall make it known. You wish to kill me, to insure my silence, — that is very clear; and in your place I should do the same." De Guiche hung down his head. "Only," continued De Wardes, triumphantly, "was it really worth while, tell me, to throw this mean affair of Bragelonne's upon my shoulders? But, take care, my dear fellow! in bringing the wild boar to bay, you enrage him to madness; in running down the fox, you give him the ferocity of the jaguar. The consequence is, that, brought to bay by you, I shall defend myself to the very last."

"You will be quite right in doing so."

"Yes, but take care! I shall work more harm than you think. In the first place, as a beginning, you will readily suppose that I have not been absurd enough to lock up my secret, or your secret rather, in my own breast. There is a friend of mine, a man of the highest intelligence, whom you know very well, who shares my secret with me; so pray understand that if you kill me, my death will not have been of much service to you; while, on the contrary, if I kill you — and everything is possible, you understand?" De Guiche shuddered. "If I kill you," continued De Wardes, "you will have secured Madame two mortal enemies, who will do their very utmost to ruin her."

"Oh, Monsieur," exclaimed De Guiche, furiously, "do not reckon upon my death so easily! Of the two enemies you speak of, I trust most heartily to dispose of one immediately, and of the other at the earliest opportunity."

The only reply De Wardes made was a burst of laughter, so diabolical in its sound that a superstitious man would have been terrified by it. But De Guiche was not so impressionable as that. "I think," he said, "that everything is now settled, M. de Wardes; so have the goodness to take your place first, unless you would prefer to have me do so."

"By no means," said De Wardes. "I shall be delighted to save you the slightest trouble;" and putting his horse into a gallop, he crossed the wide open space, and took his stand at the point of the circle which was immediately opposite to where De Guiche was stationed.

De Guiche remained motionless. At the distance of about a hundred paces the two adversaries were absolutely invisible to each other, being completely concealed by the thick shade of elms and chestnuts. A minute

elapsed amid the profoundest silence. At the end of the minute, each of them, in the deep shade in which he was concealed, heard the double click of the trigger, as they put the pistols at full cock. De Guiche, adopting the usual tactics, set his horse into a gallop, persuaded that he should find a twofold security in the undulatory movement and in the swiftness of his course. He charged in a straight line towards the point where, in his opinion, his adversary would be stationed, and he expected to meet De Wardes about half-way; but in this he was mistaken. He continued his course, presuming that De Wardes had not moved and was awaiting his approach. When, however, he had gone about two thirds of the distance, he saw the place suddenly illuminated, and a ball whistled by, cutting the plume of his hat in two. Nearly at the same moment, and as if the flash of the first shot had served to give light for the aim of the other, a second report was heard, and a second ball passed through the head of De Guiche's horse, a little below the ear. The animal fell.

These two reports proceeding from the very opposite direction to that in which he expected to find De Wardes, struck De Guiche with surprise; but as he was a man of great self-possession, he prepared himself for his horse's falling, — not so completely, however, but that his boot was caught under the animal as it fell. Very fortunately, the horse in its dying agonies moved so as to enable him to release his leg, which was not much bruised. De Guiche rose, felt himself all over, and found that he was not wounded. At the very moment when he had felt the horse tottering under him, he had placed his pistols in the holsters, afraid that the force of the fall might explode one at least, if not both of them, by which accident he would have been needlessly disarmed. Once on his feet,

he took the pistols out of the holsters, and advanced towards the spot where, by the light of the flash, he had seen De Wardes appear.

De Guiche had at the first shot accounted for his adversary's manœuvre, than which nothing could have been simpler. Instead of advancing to meet De Guiche, or remaining in his place to await his approach, De Wardes had for about fifteen paces followed the circle of shade, where he could not be seen by his adversary; and at the very moment when the latter presented his flank in his career, he had fired from the place where he stood, carefully taking his aim, and assisted instead of being inconvenienced by the horse's gallop. It has been seen that, notwithstanding the darkness, the first ball had passed hardly more than an inch above De Guiche's head. De Wardes had been so sure of his aim that he had expected to see De Guiche fall; his astonishment was extreme when, on the contrary, the rider still remained erect in his saddle. He hastened to fire his second shot; but his hand trembled, and he killed the horse instead. It would be a most fortunate chance for him if De Guiche were to remain held fast under the animal. Before he could have freed himself, De Wardes would have loaded his pistol for his third shot and had De Guiche at his mercy. But De Guiche, on the contrary, was up, and had three shots to fire.

De Guiche immediately understood the position of affairs. It would be necessary to exceed De Wardes in quickness. He advanced, therefore, so as to reach him before he should have had time to reload his pistol. De Wardes saw him approaching like a tempest. The ball was rather tight, and offered some resistance to the ramrod. To load it carelessly would be to expose himself to lose his last chance; to take the proper care in loading it

would be to lose his time, or rather it would be throwing away his life. He made his horse bound to one side. De Guiche turned also; and at the moment the horse was quiet again he fired, and the ball carried De Wardes's hat from his head. De Wardes knew that he had a moment's time at his disposal; he availed himself of it to finish loading his pistol. De Guiche, noticing that his adversary did not fall, threw the pistol he had just discharged aside, and walked straight towards De Wardes, elevating the second pistol as he did so. He had hardly proceeded more than two or three paces, when De Wardes took aim at him as he was walking, and fired. An exclamation of anger was De Guiche's answer; the count's arm contracted and dropped by his side, and the pistol fell from his grasp. De Wardes saw the count stoop down, pick up the pistol with his left hand, and again advance towards him. It was a critical moment. "I am lost," murmured De Wardes; "he is not mortally wounded." At the very moment, however, that De Guiche was about to raise his pistol against De Wardes, the head, shoulders, and limbs of the count seemed to give way all at once. He heaved a deep-drawn sigh, tottered, and fell at the feet of De Wardes's horse.

"That is all right," said De Wardes; and gathering up the reins, he struck his spurs into his horse's sides. The horse cleared the count's motionless body, and bore De Wardes rapidly back to the château. When he arrived there, he remained a quarter of an hour deliberating within himself as to the proper course to be adopted. In his impatience to leave the field of battle, he had neglected to ascertain whether De Guiche were dead or not. A double hypothesis presented itself to De Wardes's agitated mind, — either De Guiche was killed, or De Guiche was wounded only. If he were killed, why should he leave his body in

that manner to the wolves? It was a perfectly useless piece of cruelty; for if De Guiche were dead, he certainly could not breathe a syllable of what had passed. If he were not killed, why should he, De Wardes, by leaving him there uncared for, allow himself to be regarded as a savage, incapable of one generous feeling? This last consideration prevailed.

De Wardes immediately instituted inquiries for Manicamp. He was told that Manicamp had been looking for De Guiche, and not knowing where to find him, had retired to bed. De Wardes went and woke the sleeper, and related the whole affair to him, to which Manicamp listened in perfect silence, but with an expression of momentarily increasing energy, of which his face would hardly have been supposed capable. It was only when De Wardes had finished, that Manicamp uttered the words, "Let us go."

As they proceeded, Manicamp became more and more excited; and in proportion as De Wardes related the details of the affair to him, his countenance darkened. "And so," he said, when De Wardes had finished, "you think that he is dead?"

"Alas! I do."

"And you fought in that manner, without witnesses?"

"He insisted upon it."

"It is very singular."

"What do you mean by saying that it is singular?"

"That it is so very unlike M. de Guiche's disposition."

"You do not doubt my word, I suppose?"

"Hum! hum!"

"You do doubt it, then?"

"A little. But I shall doubt it more than ever, I warn you, if I find that the poor fellow is really dead."

"M. Manicamp!"

"M. de Wardes!"

"It seems that you intend to insult me."

"Just as you please. The fact is, I never could like those people who come and say to you, 'I have killed M. So-and-so in a corner; it is a great pity, but I killed him in a perfectly honorable manner.' It has a very ugly appearance, M. de Wardes."

"Silence! we have arrived."

In fact, the little open glade could now be seen, and in the open space lay the motionless body of the dead horse. To the right of the horse, upon the dark grass, with his face against the ground, the poor count lay, bathed in his blood. He had remained in the same spot, and did not even seem to have made the slightest movement. Manicamp threw himself on his knees, lifted the count in his arms, and found him quite cold, and steeped in blood. He let him gently fall again. Then, stretching out his hand and feeling all over the ground close to where the count lay, he sought until he found De Guiche's pistol.

"By Heaven!" he said, rising to his feet, pale as death, and with the pistol in his hand, "you were not mistaken; he is quite dead."

"Dead!" repeated De Wardes.

"Yes; and his pistol is still loaded," added Manicamp, feeling the pan with his finger.

"But I told you that I took aim as he was walking towards me, and fired at him at the very moment when he was aiming at me."

"Are you quite sure that you have fought with him, M. de Wardes? I confess that I am very much afraid you have assassinated him. Oh, no exclamations! You have had your three shots, and his pistol is still loaded. You have killed his horse, and he, De Guiche, one of the best marksmen in France, has not even touched either

your horse or yourself. Well, M. de Wardes, you have been very unlucky in bringing me here. All the blood in my body seems to have mounted to my head; and I verily believe that since so good an opportunity presents itself, I shall blow out your brains on the spot So, M. de Wardes, recommend your soul to Heaven."

"M. de Manicamp, you cannot think of such a thing!"

"On the contrary, I am thinking of it very strongly."

"Would you assassinate me?"

"Without the slightest remorse, at least for the present."

"Are you a gentleman?"

"I have given a great many proofs of it."

"Let me defend my life, then, at least."

"Very likely; in order, I suppose, that you may do to me what you have done to poor De Guiche," and Manicamp slowly raised his pistol to the height of De Wardes's breast, and with arm stretched out, and a determined scowl on his face, took a careful aim.

De Wardes did not attempt a flight; he was completely terrified. Then, in the midst of this horrible silence, which lasted about a second, but which seemed an age to De Wardes, a faint sigh was heard.

"Oh," exclaimed De Wardes, "he lives! he lives! Help, M. de Guiche! I am about to be assassinated!"

Manicamp fell back a step or two, and the two young men saw the count raise himself slowly and painfully upon one hand. Manicamp threw the pistol away a dozen paces, and ran to his friend, uttering a cry of delight. De Wardes wiped his forehead, which was bathed in a cold perspiration.

"It was time," he murmured.

"How much are you hurt?" inquired Manicamp of De Guiche, "and where?"

De Guiche showed him his mutilated hand and his chest covered with blood

"Count," exclaimed De Wardes, "I am accused of having assassinated you, speak, I implore you, and say that I fought fairly."

"It is true," said the wounded man. "M. de Wardes fought quite fairly, and whoever may say the contrary will make me his enemy."

"Then, sir," said Manicamp, "assist me, in the first place, to carry this poor fellow back, and I will afterwards give you every satisfaction you please. Or if you are in a hurry, we can do better still let us stanch the blood from the count's wounds here with your pocket handkerchief and mine; and then, as there are two shots left, we can have them between us."

"Thank you," said De Wardes. "Twice already in one hour I have seen Death too close at hand to be agreeable; I don't like his look at all, and I prefer your apologies."

Manicamp burst out laughing, and De Guiche, too, in spite of his sufferings. The two young men wished to carry him, but he declared that he felt himself quite strong enough to walk alone. The ball had broken his ring-finger and his little finger, and then had glanced along his side, but without penetrating deeply into his chest. It was the pain rather than the seriousness of the wound, therefore, which had overcome De Guiche. Manicamp passed his arm under one of the count's shoulders, and De Wardes did the same with the other; and in this way they brought him back to Fontainebleau, to the house of the same doctor who had been present at the death of the Franciscan, Aramis's predecessor.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE KING'S SUPPER.

The king, meanwhile, had sat down to the supper-table, and the not very large number of guests invited for that day had taken their seats, after the usual gesture intimating the royal permission to be seated. At this period of Louis XIV.'s reign, although etiquette was not governed by the strict regulations which subsequently were adopted, the French Court had entirely thrown aside the traditions of good-fellowship and patriarchal affability which still existed in the time of Henry IV., and which the suspicious mind of Louis XIII. had gradually replaced by the ceremonial semblance of a grandeur which he despaired of being able fully to realize.

The king, then, was seated alone at a small separate table, which, like the desk of a president, overlooked the adjoining tables. Although we say a small table, we must not omit to add that this small table was yet the largest one there. Moreover, it was the one on which were placed the greatest number and variety of dishes, — consisting of fish, game, meat, fruit, vegetables, and preserves. The king was young and vigorous, very fond of hunting. addicted to all violent exercises of the body, and possessed, besides, like all the members of the Bourbon family, a rapid digestion and an appetite speedily renewed. Louis XIV. was a formidable table-companion. He delighted to criticise his cooks; but when he honored them by praise and commendation, the honor was overwhelming. The king began by eating several kinds of

soup, either mixed together or taken separately. He intermingled, or rather he isolated, the soups with glasses of old wine. He ate quickly and somewhat greedily.

Porthos, who from the beginning had out of respect been waiting for a jog of D'Artagnan's elbow, seeing the king make such rapid progress, turned to the musketeer and said in a low tone, "It seems as if one might go on now; his Majesty is very encouraging in the example he sets. Look!"

"The king eats," said D'Artagnan, "but he talks at the same time. Try to manage matters in such a manner that if he should happen to address a remark to you, he would not find you with your mouth full, for that would be very awkward."

"The best way, in that case," said Porthos, "is to eat no supper at all. And yet I am very hungry, I admit; and everything looks and smells most inviting, as if appealing to all my senses at once."

"Don't for a moment think of not eating," said D'Artagnan; "that would put his Majesty out terribly. The king has a habit of saying that he who works well eats well, and he does not like to have people eat daintily at his table."

"But how can I avoid having my mouth full if I eat?" said Porthos.

"All you have to do," replied the captain of the Musketeers, "is simply to swallow what you have in it whenever the king does you the honor to address a remark to you."

"Very good," said Porthos; and from that moment he began to eat with a well-bred enthusiasm.

The king occasionally looked at the different persons who were at table with him, and as a connoisseur could appreciate the different dispositions of his guests.

"M. du Vallon!" he said.

Porthos was enjoying a ragout of hare, and swallowed half of the back. His name pronounced in such a manner made him start, and by a vigorous effort of his gullet he absorbed the whole mouthful.

"Sire," replied Porthos, in a stifled voice, but sufficiently intelligible, nevertheless.

"Let that fillet of lamb be handed to M. du Vallon," said the king. "Do you like browned meats, M. du Vallon?"

"Sire, I like everything," replied Porthos.

D'Artagnan whispered, "Everything your Majesty sends me."

Porthos repeated, "Everything your Majesty sends me," — an observation which the king apparently received with great satisfaction.

"People eat well who work well," replied the king, delighted to have opposite him a guest of Porthos's capacity. Porthos received the dish of lamb, and put a portion of it on his plate.

"Well?" said the king.

"Exquisite," said Porthos, calmly.

"Have you as good mutton in your part of the country, M. du Vallon?" continued the king.

"Sire," said Porthos, "I believe that from my own province, as everywhere else, the best of everything is sent to Paris for your Majesty's use; but, on the other hand, I do not eat mutton in the same way your Majesty does."

"Ah! and how do you eat it?"

"Generally, I have a lamb dressed quite whole."

"Quite whole?"

"Yes, Sire."

"In what manner, then?"

"In this, Sire: my cook, who is a German, first stuffs the lamb in question with small sausages which he procures from Strasburg, forcemeat-balls which he procures from Troyes, and larks which he procures from Pithiviers; by some means or other, with which I am not acquainted, he bones the lamb as he would bone a fowl, leaving the skin on, however, which forms a brown crust all over the animal. When it is cut in beautiful slices, in the same way that one would cut an enormous sausage, a rose-colored gravy issues forth, which is as agreeable to the eye as it is exquisite to the palate;" and Porthos finished by smacking his lips.

The king opened his eyes with delight, and, while cutting some of the *faisan en daube*, which was handed to him, he said: "That is a dish I should very much like to taste, M. du Vallon. Is it possible? — a whole lamb!"

"Yes, Sire."

"Pass those pheasants to M. du Vallon; I perceive that he is a connoisseur."

The order was obeyed. Then, continuing the conversation, he said, "And you do not find the lamb too fat?"

"No, Sire; the fat falls down at the same time that the gravy does, and swims on the surface; then the servant who carves removes the fat with a silver spoon, which I have had made expressly for that purpose."

"Where do you reside?" inquired the king.

"At Pierrefonds, Sire."

"At Pierrefonds; where is that, M. du Vallon, — near Belle-Isle?"

"Oh, no, Sire; Pierrefonds is in the Soissonnais."

"I thought that you alluded to the mutton on account of the salt marshes."

"No, Sire; I have marshes which are not salt, it is true, but which are not the less valuable on that account."

The king had now arrived at the *entrees*, but without losing sight of Porthos, who continued to play his part in his best manner.

"You have an excellent appetite, M. du Vallon," said the king, "and you make an admirable table-companion."

"Ah, Sire, if your Majesty were ever to pay a visit to Pierrefonds, we would both of us eat our lamb together; for your appetite is not an indifferent one, by any means."

D'Artagnan gave Porthos a severe kick under the table, which made Porthos color up.

"At your Majesty's present happy age," said Porthos, in order to repair the mistake he had made, "I was in the Musketeers, and nothing could ever satisfy me then. Your Majesty has an excellent appetite, as I have already had the honor of mentioning, but you select what you eat with too much refinement to be called a great eater."

The king seemed charmed at his guest's politeness.

"Will you try some of these creams?" he said to Porthos.

"Sire, your Majesty treats me with far too much kindness to prevent me from speaking the whole truth."

"Pray do so, M. du Vallon."

"Well, Sire, with regard to sweet dishes, I recognize only pastry, and even that should be rather solid; all these frothy substances swell my stomach, and occupy a space which seems to me to be too precious to be so badly tenanted."

"Ah, Messieurs," said the king, indicating Porthos by a gesture, "here is indeed a perfect model of gastronomy. It was in such a manner that our fathers, who so well knew what good living was, used to eat; while we," added his Majesty, "can do nothing but trifle with our food;"

and as he spoke he took a fresh plate of chicken, with ham, while Porthos attacked a ragout of partridges and land-rails.

The cup-bearer filled his Majesty's glass to the brim. "Give M. du Vallon some of my wine," said the king. This was one of the greatest honors of the royal table.

D'Artagnan pressed his friend's knee. "If you can only manage to swallow the half of that boar's head I see yonder," said he to Porthos, "I shall believe that you will be a duke and a peer within the next twelvemonth."

"Presently," said Porthos, phlegmatically; "I shall come to it by and by."

In fact it was not long before it came to the boar's turn, for the king seemed to take a pleasure in urging on this famous guest. He did not pass any of the dishes to Porthos until he had tasted them himself, and he accordingly took some of the boar's head. Porthos showed that he could keep pace with his sovereign; and instead of eating the half, as D'Artagnan had told him, he ate three fourths of it. "It is impossible," said the king in an undertone, "that a gentleman who eats so good a supper every day and who has such beautiful teeth can be otherwise than the most praiseworthy man in my kingdom."

"Do you hear?" said D'Artagnan in his friend's ear.

"Yes; I think I am rather in favor," said Porthos, balancing himself on his chair.

"Oh, you are in luck's way!"

The king and Porthos continued to eat in the same manner, to the great satisfaction of the other guests, some of whom from emulation had attempted to follow them, but had been obliged to give up on the way. The king soon began to get flushed, and the reaction of the blood to his face announced that the moment of repletion had arrived. It was then that Louis XIV., instead of becom-

ing gay and cheerful, as most good livers generally do, became dull, melancholy, and taciturn. Porthos, on the contrary, was lively and communicative. D'Artagnan's foot had more than once to remind him of this peculiarity of the king. The dessert now made its appearance. The king had ceased to think anything further of Porthos; he turned his eyes anxiously towards the entrance-door, and was heard occasionally to inquire how it happened that M. de Saint-Aignan was so long in arriving. At last, at the moment when his Majesty was finishing a pot of preserved plums with a deep sigh, M. de Saint-Aignan appeared. The king's eyes, which had become somewhat dull, immediately began to sparkle. The count advanced towards the king's table, and Louis rose at his approach. Everybody rose at the same time, — even Porthos, who was just finishing an almond cake which might have made the jaws of a crocodile stick together. The supper was over.

CHAPTER XXII.

AFTER SUPPER.

THE king took Saint-Aignan by the arm, and passed into the adjoining room. "What has detained you, Count?" said the king.

"I was bringing the answer, Sire," replied the count.

"She has taken a long time to reply to what I wrote her."

"Sire, your Majesty has deigned to write in verse, and Mademoiselle de la Vallière wished to repay your Majesty in the same coin, — that is to say, in gold."

"Verses, De Saint-Aignan!" exclaimed the king, in ecstasy; "give them to me at once!" and Louis broke the seal of a little letter, enclosing the verses which history has preserved entire for us, and which are more meritorious in intention than in execution. Such as they were, however, the king was enchanted with them, and exhibited his satisfaction by unequivocal transports of delight; but the universal silence which reigned in the rooms warned Louis, so sensitively particular with regard to good breeding, that his delight might give rise to various interpretations. He turned aside and put the note in his pocket, and then advancing a few steps, which brought him again to the threshold of the door near his guests, said, "M. du Vallon, I have seen you to-day with the greatest pleasure, and my pleasure will be equally great to see you again." Porthos bowed as the Colossus of Rhodes might have done, and retired from the room with his face towards

the king. "M. d'Artagnan," continued the king, "you will await my orders in the gallery; I am obliged to you for having made me acquainted with M. du Vallon. Messieurs," addressing himself to the other guests, "I return to Paris to-morrow, on account of the departure of the Spanish and Dutch ambassadors. Until to-morrow, then!"

The apartment was immediately cleared of the guests. The king took Saint-Aignan by the arm, made him read La Vallière's verses over again, and said, "What do you think of them?"

"Charming, Sire."

"They charm me, in fact; and if they were known —"

"Oh! the professional poets would be jealous of them; but they will never know them."

"Did you give her mine?"

"Oh, Sire, she positively devoured them!"

"They were very weak, I am afraid."

"That is not what Mademoiselle de la Vallière said of them."

"Do you think that she was pleased with them?"

"I am sure of it, Sire."

"I must answer, then."

"Oh, Sire, immediately after supper? Your Majesty will fatigue yourself."

"I believe that you are right; study after eating is very injurious."

"The labor of a poet especially so; and besides, at this moment great excitement prevails at Mademoiselle de la Vallière's."

"What do you mean?"

"With her, as with all the other ladies of the court."

"Why?"

"On account of poor De Guiche's accident."

"Has anything serious happened to De Guiche, then?"

"Yes, Sire, he has one hand nearly destroyed, and a hole in his breast; in fact, he is dying."

"Good heavens! who told you that?"

"Manicamp brought him back just now to the house of a doctor here in Fontainebleau, and the rumor soon reached us all here."

"Brought back! Poor De Guiche; and how did it happen?"

"Ah, Sire, that is the very question, — how did it happen?"

"You say that in a very singular manner, De Saint-Aignan. Give me the details. What does he himself say?"

"He says nothing, Sire; but others do."

"What others?"

"Those who brought him back, Sire."

"Who are they?"

"I do not know, Sire; but M. de Manicamp knows. M. de Manicamp is one of his friends."

"As everybody is, indeed," said the king.

"Oh, no," returned De Saint-Aignan, "you are mistaken, Sire; every one is not precisely a friend of M. de Guiche."

"How do you know that?"

"Does your Majesty require me to explain myself?"

"Certainly I do."

"Well, Sire, I believe I have heard something said about a quarrel between two gentlemen."

"When?"

"This very evening, before your Majesty's supper was served."

"That can hardly be. I have issued such stringent and severe ordinances with respect to duelling, that no one, I presume, would dare to disobey them."

"In that case Heaven preserve me from excusing any one!" exclaimed De Saint-Aignan. "Your Majesty commanded me to speak, and I speak."

"Tell me, then, in what way the Comte de Guiche has been wounded?"

"Sire, it is said to have been at a boar-hunt."

"This evening?"

"Yes, Sire."

"One of his hands shattered, and a hole in his breast! Who was at the hunt with M. de Guiche?"

"I do not know, Sire; but M. de Manicamp knows, or ought to know."

"You are concealing something from me, De Saint-Aignan."

"Nothing, Sire, I assure you."

"Then explain to me how the accident happened; was it a musket that burst?"

"Very likely, Sire. But yet, on reflection, it could hardly have been that, for De Guiche's pistol was found close by him still loaded."

"His pistol? But a man does not go to a boar-hunt with a pistol."

"Sire, it is also said that De Guiche's horse was killed, and that the horse's body is still to be found in the clearing."

"His horse? De Guiche go on horseback to a boar-hunt! De Saint-Aignan, I do not understand a thing of what you have been telling me. Where did the affair happen?"

"At the circle, in the Rochin woods."

"That will do. Call M. d'Artagnan!"

De Saint-Aignan obeyed, and the musketeer entered.

"M. d'Artagnan," said the king, "you will leave this place by the little door of the private staircase."

"Yes, Sire."

"You will mount your horse."

"Yes, Sire."

"And you will proceed to the circle of the Rochin woods. Do you know the spot?"

"Yes, Sire. I have fought there twice."

"What!" exclaimed the king, amazed at the reply.

"Under the edicts, Sire, of Cardinal Richelieu," returned D'Artagnan, with his usual impassibility.

"That is very different, Monsieur. You will therefore go there, and examine the locality very carefully. A man has been wounded there, and you will find a horse lying dead. You will tell me what your opinion is upon the whole affair."

"Very good, Sire."

"Of course it is your own opinion I wish to have, and not that of any one else."

"You shall have it in an hour's time, Sire."

"I prohibit your speaking with any one, whoever he may be."

"Except with the person who must give me a lantern," said D'Artagnan.

"Oh, that is a matter of course!" said the king, laughing at the liberty which he tolerated in no one but his captain of Musketeers.

D'Artagnan left by the little staircase.

"Now, let my physician be sent for," said Louis.

Ten minutes afterwards the king's physician arrived, quite out of breath.

"You will go, Monsieur," said the king to him, "with M. de Saint-Aignan wherever he may take you; you will render me an account of the condition of the patient you may see in the house to which you will be taken."

The physician obeyed without a remark, as at that

time people were beginning to obey Louis XIV., and left the room preceding De Saint-Aignan.

"Do you, De Saint-Aignan, send Manicamp to me before the physician can possibly have spoken to him;" and De Saint-Aignan left in his turn.

CHAPTER XXIII.

HOW D'ARTAGNAN DISCHARGED THE MISSION WITH WHICH THE KING HAD INTRUSTED HIM.

WHILE the king was engaged in making these last-mentioned arrangements in order to ascertain the truth, D'Artagnan, without losing a second, ran to the stable, took down the lantern, saddled his horse himself, and proceeded towards the place which his Majesty had indicated. According to the promise he had made, he had neither seen nor met any one; and as we have observed, he had carried his scruples so far as to do without the assistance of the helpers in the stables altogether. D'Artagnan was one of those who in moments of difficulty pride themselves on increasing their own value. By dint of hard galloping, he in less than five minutes reached the wood, fastened his horse to the first tree he came to, and went into the broad open space on foot. He then began to inspect most carefully, on foot and with his lantern in his hand, the whole surface of the circle, — went forward, turned back again, measured, examined, — and after half an hour's minute inspection returned silently to his horse, and pursued his way in deep reflection and at a foot-pace to Fontainebleau. Louis was waiting in his cabinet; he was alone, and with a pencil was scribbling on paper certain lines which D'Artagnan at the first glance recognized as being very unequal and very much scratched up. He concluded that they must be verses. The king raised his

head and perceived D'Artagnan. "Well, Monsieur," he said, "do you bring me any news?"

"Yes, Sire."

"What have you seen?"

"So far as probability goes, Sire—" D'Artagnan began to reply.

"It was certainty I requested of you."

"I will approach that as nearly as I possibly can. The weather was very well adapted for investigations of the character which I have just made; it has been raining this evening, and the roads are wet and muddy—"

"Well, the result, M. d'Artagnan?"

"Sire, your Majesty told me that there was a horse lying dead in the cross-road of the Rochin woods, and I began, therefore, by studying the roads. I say the roads, because the centre of the circle is reached by four separate roads. The one that I myself took was the only one that presented any fresh tracks. Two horses had followed it side by side; their eight feet were marked very distinctly in the clay. One of the riders was more impatient than the other, for the footprints of the one were invariably in advance of the other by about half a horse's length."

"Are you quite sure they came together?" said the king.

"Yes, Sire. The horses are two rather large animals of equal pace, — horses well used to manœuvres of all kinds, for they wheeled round the barrier of the circle together."

"What next, Monsieur?"

"The two riders paused there for a minute, no doubt to arrange the conditions of the engagement; the horses grew restless and impatient. One of the riders spoke, while the other listened and seemed to have contented himself by simply answering. His horse pawed the ground, which proves that his attention was so taken up by listening that he let the bridle fall from his hand."

"A hostile meeting did take place, then?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Continue! You are a most accurate observer."

"One of the two cavaliers remained where he was standing, — the one, in fact, who had been listening; the other crossed the open space, and at first placed himself directly opposite to his adversary. Then the one who had remained stationary crossed the circle at a gallop, about two thirds of its length, thinking that he was riding upon his opponent, but the latter had followed the circumference of the wood."

"You are ignorant of their names, I suppose?"

"Completely so, Sire. Only he who followed the circumference of the wood was mounted on a black horse."

"How do you know that?"

"I found a few hairs of his tail among the brambles which bordered the sides of the ditch."

"Go on!"

"As for the other horse, there can be no trouble in describing him, since he was left dead on the field of battle."

"What was the cause of his death?"

"A ball which had passed through his temple."

"Was the ball that of a pistol or of a gun?"

"It was a pistol-bullet, Sire. Besides, the manner in which the horse was wounded explained to me the tactics of the man who had killed it. He had followed the circumference of the wood in order to take his adversary on the flank. Moreover, I followed his foot-tracks on the grass."

"The tracks of the black horse, do you mean?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Go on, M. d'Artagnan!"

"As your Majesty now perceives the position of the two adversaries, I will, for a moment, leave the cavalier who had remained stationary for the one who started off at a gallop."

"Do so."

"The horse of the cavalier who charged was killed on the spot."

"How do you know that?"

"The cavalier had not time even to throw himself off his horse, and so fell with it. I observed the impression of his leg, which with a great effort he was enabled to extricate from under the horse. The spur, pressed down by the weight of the animal, had ploughed up the ground."

"Very good; and what did he do when he got up again?"

"He walked straight up to his adversary."

"Who still remained upon the verge of the wood?"

"Yes, Sire. Then, having reached a favorable distance, he stopped firmly, — for the impression of both his heels are left in the ground quite close to each other, — fired, and missed his adversary."

"How do you know that he did not hit him?"

"I found a hat with a ball through it."

"Ah, a proof, then!" exclaimed the king.

"Insufficient, Sire," replied D'Artagnan, coldly. "It is a hat without any letters indicating its ownership, without arms; it has a red feather, as all hats have; the lace, even, had nothing to distinguish it."

"Did the man with the hat through which the bullet had passed fire a second time?"

"Oh, Sire, he had already fired twice."

"How did you ascertain that?"

"I found the waddings of the pistol."

"And what became of the bullet which did not kill the horse?"

"It cut in two the feather of the hat belonging to him against whom it was directed, and broke a small birch at the other end of the clearing."

"In that case, then, the man on the black horse was disarmed, while his adversary had still one more shot to fire."

"Sire, while the dismounted rider was getting up, the other was reloading his pistol. Only, he was much agitated while he was loading it, and his hand trembled greatly."

"How do you know that?"

"Half the charge fell to the ground; and he threw the ramrod aside, not having time to replace it in the pistol."

"M. d'Artagnan, what you tell me is marvellous."

"It is only close observation, Sire, and the commonest scout would do as much."

"The whole scene is before me from the manner in which you relate it."

"I have, in fact, reconstructed it in my own mind, with merely a few alterations."

"And now," said the king, "let us return to the dismounted cavalier. You were saying that he had walked up to his adversary while the latter was reloading his pistol."

"Yes; but at the very moment he himself was taking aim, the other fired."

"Oh!" said the king; "and the shot?"

"The shot told terribly, Sire; the dismounted cavalier fell upon his face, after having staggered forward three or four paces."

"Where was he hit?"

"In two places, — in the first place, in his right hand, and then, by the same bullet, in his chest."

"But how could you ascertain that?" inquired the king, full of admiration.

"By a very simple means: the butt-end of the pistol was covered with blood, and the trace of the bullet could be observed with fragments of a broken ring. The wounded man, in all probability, had the ring-finger and the little finger carried away."

"So far as the hand goes, I have nothing to say; but the chest!"

"Sire, there were two small pools of blood, at a distance of about two feet and a half from each other. At one of these pools of blood the grass was torn up by the clinched hand; at the other the grass was simply pressed down by the weight of the body."

"Poor De Guiche!" exclaimed the king

"Ah! it was M. de Guiche, then?" said the musketeer, very quietly. "I suspected it, but did not venture to mention it to your Majesty."

"And what made you suspect it?"

"I recognized the De Grammont arms upon the holsters of the dead horse."

"And you think that he is seriously wounded?"

"Very seriously, since he fell immediately, and remained a long time in the same place; however, he was able to walk, as he left the spot supported by two friends."

"You met him returning, then?"

"No; but I observed the footprints of three men. The one on the right and the one on the left walked freely and easily, but the one in the middle dragged his feet as he walked; besides, he left traces of blood at every step he took."

"Now, Monsieur, since you saw the combat so dis

tinctly that not a single detail seems to have escaped you, tell me something about De Guiche's adversary."

"Oh, Sire, I do not know him."

"And yet you see everything so clearly."

"Yes, Sire," said D'Artagnan, "I see everything, but I do not tell all I see; and since the poor devil has escaped, your Majesty will permit me to say that I do not intend to denounce him."

"And yet he is guilty, since he has fought a duel, Monsieur."

"Not guilty in my eyes, Sire," said D'Artagnan, coldly.

"Monsieur!" exclaimed the king, "are you aware of what you are saying?"

"Perfectly, Sire; but, according to my notion, a man who fights well is a brave man; — such, at least, is my own opinion. But your Majesty may have another; that is very natural, — you are the master here."

"M. d'Artagnan, I ordered you, however — "

D'Artagnan interrupted the king by a respectful gesture. "You ordered me, Sire, to gather what particulars I could respecting a hostile meeting that had taken place; those particulars you have. If you order me to arrest M. de Guiche's adversary, I will obey; but do not order me to denounce him to you, for in that case I will not obey."

"Very well! Arrest him, then!"

"Give me his name, Sire."

The king stamped his foot angrily; but after a moment's reflection he said, "You are right, — ten times, twenty times, a hundred times right."

"That is my opinion, Sire; I am happy that at the same time it accords with your Majesty's."

"One word more. Who carried assistance to De Guiche?"

"I do not know."

"But you speak of two men. There was a second, then."

"There was no second. Nay, more than that, when M. de Guiche fell his adversary fled without even giving him any assistance."

"The miserable coward!"

"The consequence of your ordinances, Sire. If a man has fought well and fairly, and has already escaped one chance of death, he naturally wishes to escape a second. M. de Bouttoville cannot be forgotten very easily."

"And so men turn cowards."

"No; they become prudent."

"And he has fled, then, you say?"

"Yes; and as fast as his horse could possibly carry him."

"In what direction?"

"In the direction of the château."

"What then?"

"Afterwards, as I have had the honor of telling your Majesty, two men on foot arrived, who carried M. de Guiche back with them."

"What proof have you that these men arrived after the combat?"

"A very evident proof, Sire. At the moment the encounter took place the rain had just ceased; the ground had not had time to absorb the moisture, and had consequently become damp; the footsteps sank in: but after the combat, while M. de Guiche was lying there in a fainting condition, the ground became firm again, and the footsteps made a less sensible impression."

Louis clapped his hands together in sign of admiration. "M. d'Artagnan," he said, "you are positively the cleverest man in my kingdom."

"The very thing that M. de Richelieu thought, and M. de Mazarin said, Sire."

"And now it remains for us to see whether your sagacity is in fault."

"Oh, Sire, a man may be mistaken; *errare humanum est*," said the musketeer, philosophically.

"In that case you are not human, M. d'Artagnan, for I believe you never are mistaken."

"Your Majesty said that we were going to see."

"Yes."

"In what way may I venture to ask?"

"I have sent for M. de Manicamp, and M. de Manicamp is coming."

"And M. de Manicamp knows the secret?"

"De Guiche keeps no secrets from M. de Manicamp."

D'Artagnan shook his head. "No one was present at the combat, I repeat; and unless M. de Manicamp was one of the two men who brought him back —"

"Hush!" said the king, "here he is coming; remain there and listen attentively."

"Very good, Sire," said the musketeer.

And at the same moment Manicamp and De Saint-Aignan appeared at the threshold of the door.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE ENCOUNTER.

THE KING made, first to the musketeer and then to De Saint-Aignan, an imperious and significant gesture, as much as to say, "On your lives, not a word!" D'Artagnan withdrew, like a soldier, into a corner of the room; De Saint-Aignan, in his character of favorite, leaned over the back of the king's chair. Manicamp, with his right foot properly advanced, a smile upon his lips, and his white and well-formed hands gracefully disposed, advanced to make his reverence to the king, who returned the salutation by a bow.

"Good-evening, M. de Manicamp," he said.

"Your Majesty did me the honor to send for me," said Manicamp.

"Yes, in order to learn from you all the details of the unfortunate accident which has befallen the Comte de Guiche."

"Oh, Sire! it is very grievous indeed."

"You were there?"

"Not precisely so, Sire."

"But you arrived on the scene where the accident occurred a few minutes after it took place?"

"I did so, Sire, about half an hour afterwards."

"And where did the accident take place?"

"I believe, Sire, the place is called the circle of the Rochin woods."

"Oh! the rendezvous of the hunt."

"The very spot, Sire."

"Well, tell me what you know of the details of this unhappy affair, M. de Manicamp."

"Perhaps your Majesty has already been informed of them, and I fear to fatigue you by useless repetitions."

"No; do not be afraid of that!"

Manicamp looked all around him. He saw only D'Artagnan leaning with his back against the wainscot, — D'Artagnan, calm, kind, and good-natured as usual, — and De Saint-Aignan, with whom he had come, and who still leaned over the king's arm-chair with an expression of countenance equally full of good feeling. He determined, therefore, to speak out. "Your Majesty is perfectly aware," he said, "that accidents are very frequent in hunting."

"In hunting, do you say?"

"Yes, Sire, I mean when an animal is brought to bay."

"Ah!" said the king, "it was when the animal was brought to bay, then, that the accident happened."

"Why, yes, Sire," ventured Manicamp; "was your Majesty not aware of that?"

"I heard something like that," said the king, hastily, for Louis XIV. was averse to lying; "it was, then, when the animal was at bay, you say, that the accident happened?"

"Alas! Sire, unhappily, it was so."

The king paused for a moment before he inquired, "What animal was being hunted?"

"A wild boar, Sire."

"And what could possibly have possessed De Guiche to go to a wild-boar hunt by himself? That is but a clownish idea of sport, and fit only for that class of people who unlike the Maréchal de Grammont have no dogs and huntsmen to hunt as gentlemen should do."

Manicamp shrugged his shoulders. "Youth is very rash," he said sententiously.

"Well, go on!" said the king.

"At all events," continued Manicamp, not venturing to be too precipitate and hasty, and letting his words fall very slowly, one by one, just as a fen-man takes his steps in a marsh, — "at all events, Sire, poor De Guiche went hunting, — quite alone."

"Quite alone, indeed! What a sportsman! And is not M. de Guiche aware that the wild boar always stands at bay?"

"That is the very thing which really happened, Sire."

"He had some idea, then, that the beast was there?"

"Yes, Sire; some peasants had seen it among their potatoes."

"And what kind of an animal was it?"

"A short, thick beast."

"You may as well tell me, Monsieur, that De Guiche had some idea of committing suicide, for I have seen him hunt, and he is a very expert hunter. Whenever he fires at an animal brought to bay and held in check by the dogs, he takes every possible precaution, and he fires with a carbine; and on this occasion he seems to have faced the boar with pistols only." Manicamp started. "A costly pair of pistols, excellent weapons to fight a duel with a man and not with a wild boar! What absurdity!"

"There are some things, Sire, which are difficult of explanation."

"You are quite right, and the event which we are now discussing is one of those things. Go on!"

During the recital De Saint-Aignan, who perhaps would have made a sign to Manicamp to be careful what he was about, was held in check by the persistent watchfulness of the king; so that it was utterly impossible to communicate with Manicamp in any way. As for D'Artagnan, the statue of Silence at Athens was far more noisy and

far more expressive than he. Manicamp, therefore, was obliged to continue in the same way in which he had begun, and so contrived to get more and more entangled in his explanation. "Sire," he said, "this is probably how the affair happened: De Guiche was waiting to receive the boar as it rushed towards him."

"On foot or on horseback?" inquired the king.

"On horseback. He fired upon the brute and missed his aim, and then it dashed upon him."

"And the horse was killed."

"Ah! your Majesty knows that, then."

"I have been told that a horse has been found lying dead in the cross-roads of the Rochin woods, and I presumed it was De Guiche's horse."

"It was his, indeed, Sire."

"Well, so much for the horse, and now for De Guiche."

"De Guiche, once down, was attacked and worried by the wild boar, and wounded in the hand and in the chest."

"It is a horrible accident, but it must be admitted that it was De Guiche's own fault. How could he possibly have gone to hunt such an animal merely armed with pistols? He must have forgotten the fable of Adonis."

Manicamp rubbed his ear in seeming perplexity. "Very true," he said; "it was very imprudent."

"Can you explain it, M. Manicamp?"

"Sire, what is written is written!"

"Ah! you are a fatalist."

Manicamp looked very uncomfortable and ill at ease. "I am angry with you, M. Manicamp," continued the king.

"With me, Sire?"

"Yes. How was it that you, who are De Guiche's

intimate friend, and who know that he is subject to such acts of folly, did not stop him in time?"

Manicamp hardly knew what to do; the tone in which the king spoke was not exactly that of a credulous man. On the other hand, the tone did not indicate any particular severity, nor did it have the insistence of a cross-examination. There was more of raillery in it than of menace.

"And you say, then," continued the king, "that it was positively Guiche's horse that was found dead?"

"Quite positive, Sire."

"Did that astonish you?"

"No, Sire; for your Majesty will remember that at the last hunt M. de Saint-Maure had a horse killed under him, and in the same way."

"Yes, but that one was ripped open."

"Of course, Sire."

"Had Guiche's horse been ripped open like M. de Saint-Maure's horse, that would not have astonished me, indeed."

Manicamp opened his eyes very wide.

"But what astonishes me," continued the king, "is that Guiche's horse, instead of having its belly ripped open, had its skull broken."

Manicamp was in great confusion.

"Am I mistaken?" resumed the king; "was it not in the temple that Guiche's horse was struck? You must admit, M. de Manicamp, that that is a very singular wound."

"You are aware, Sire, that the horse is a very intelligent animal, and he endeavored to defend himself."

"But a horse defends himself with his hind feet, and not with his head."

"In that case the terrified horse might have been knocked down," said Manicamp; "and the boar, you understand, Sire, the boar —"

"Oh, I understand that perfectly, so far as the horse is concerned; but how about his rider?"

"Well, that, too, is simple enough. The boar left the horse and attacked the rider, and, as I have already had the honor of informing your Majesty, shattered De Guiche's hand at the very moment he was about to discharge his second pistol at him, and then, with a blow of his tusk, made that terrible hole in his chest."

"Nothing can possibly be more likely; really, M. de Manicamp, you are wrong in placing so little confidence in your own eloquence, and you can tell a story most admirably."

"Your Majesty is exceedingly kind," said Manicamp, bowing in the most embarrassed manner.

"From this day henceforth, I shall prohibit any gentleman attached to my court from going to a similar encounter. Really, one might just as well permit duelling."

Manicamp started, and moved as if he were about to withdraw. "Is your Majesty satisfied?" he inquired.

"Delighted; but do not withdraw yet, M. de Manicamp," said Louis, — "I have business with you."

"Well, well!" thought D'Artagnan, "there is another who is not up to our mark;" and he uttered a sigh which might signify, "Oh! the men of our stamp, where are they now?"

At this moment an usher lifted the curtain before the door, and announced the king's physician.

"Ah!" exclaimed Louis, "here comes M. Valot, who has just been to see M. de Guiche. We shall now hear news of the wounded man."

Manicamp felt more uncomfortable than ever. "In this way, at least," added the king, "our conscience will be quite clear;" and he looked at D'Artagnan, who did not seem in the slightest degree discomposed.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE PHYSICIAN.

M. VALOT entered. The position of the different persons present was precisely the same, — the king was seated, De Saint-Aignan was still leaning over the back of his arm-chair, D'Artagnan stood with his back against the wall, and Manicamp was still standing.

"Well, M. Valot," said the king, "have you obeyed my directions?"

"With the greatest alacrity, Sire."

"You went to your colleague's house in Fontainebleau?"

"Yes, Sire."

"And you found M. de Guiche there?"

"I did, Sire."

"What state was he in? Speak unreservedly."

"In a very sad state, indeed, Sire."

"The wild boar did not quite devour him, however?"

"Devour whom?"

"Guiche."

"What wild boar?"

"The boar that wounded him."

"M. de Guiche wounded by a boar?"

"So it is said, at least."

"By a poacher, rather, or by a jealous husband or an ill-used lover, who in order to be revenged fired upon him."

"What is that you say, M. Valot? Were not M. de Guiche's wounds produced by defending himself against a wild boar?"

"M. de Guiche's wounds were produced by a pistol-bullet which broke his ring-finger and the little finger of the right hand, and afterwards buried itself in the intercostal muscles of the chest."

"A bullet! Are you sure M. de Guiche has been wounded by a bullet?" exclaimed the king, pretending to look much surprised.

"Indeed I am, Sire," said Valot, — "so sure, in fact, that here it is;" and he presented to the king a half-flattened bullet, which the king looked at, but did not touch.

"Did he have that in his chest, poor fellow?" he asked.

"Not precisely. The ball did not penetrate, but was flattened, as you see, either upon the guard of the pistol or upon the right side of the breast-bone."

"Good heavens!" said the king, seriously; "you said nothing to me about all this, M. de Manicamp."

"Sire —"

"What does all this mean, then, — this invention about hunting a wild boar at nightfall? Come, speak, Monsieur!"

"Ah! Sire —"

"It seems, then, that you are right," said the king, turning round towards his captain of Musketeers, "and that a duel actually took place."

The king possessed, to a greater extent than any one else, the faculty, enjoyed by the great in power or position, of compromising and estranging those beneath him. Manicamp darted a reproachful look at the musketeer.

D'Artagnan understood the look at once, and, not wishing to remain beneath the weight of such an accusation, advanced a step forward, and said: "Sire, your Majesty

commanded me to go and explore the place where the cross-roads meet in the Rochin woods, and to report to you, according to my own ideas, what had taken place there. I submitted my observations to you, but without denouncing any one. It was your Majesty yourself who was the first to name M. le Comte de Guiche."

"Well, Monsieur, well," said the king, haughtily, "you have done your duty, and I am satisfied with you; that ought to be sufficient for you. But you, M. de Manicamp, have failed in yours, for you have told me a falsehood."

"A falsehood, Sire! The expression is a hard one."

"Find another instead, then."

"Sire, I will not attempt to do so. I have already been unfortunate enough to displease your Majesty, and it will in every respect be far better for me to accept most humbly any reproaches you may think proper to address to me."

"You are right, Monsieur; whoever conceals the truth from me risks my displeasure."

"Sometimes, Sire, one is ignorant of the truth."

"No further falsehood, Monsieur, or I double the punishment."

Manicamp bowed and turned pale. D'Artagnan again made another step forward, determined to interfere, if the still increasing anger of the king attained certain limits.

"You see, Monsieur," continued the king, "that it is useless to deny the thing any longer. M. de Guiche has fought a duel."

"I do not deny it, Sire; and it would have been generous in your Majesty not to have forced a gentleman to tell a falsehood."

"Forced! Who forced you?"

"Sire, M. de Guiche is my friend; your Majesty has for

bidden duels under pain of death; a falsehood might save my friend's life, and I told it."

"Good!" murmured D'Artagnan; "an excellent fellow, upon my word!"

"Instead of telling a falsehood, Monsieur, you should have prevented him from fighting," said the king.

"Oh, Sire, your Majesty, who is the most accomplished gentleman in France, knows quite as well as any one that we have never considered M. de Boutteville dishonored for having suffered death on the Place de Grève. That which does dishonor a man is not meeting his executioner, but avoiding his enemy."

"Well, Monsieur, that may be so," said Louis XIV.; "I am very desirous of suggesting a means of your making amends for everything."

"If it be a means of which a gentleman may avail himself, I shall most eagerly do so, Sire."

"The name of M. de Guiche's adversary?"

"Oh!" murmured D'Artagnan, "are we going to take Louis XIII. as a model?"

"Sire!" said Manicamp, with an accent of reproach.

"You will not name him, it appears, then?" said the king.

"Sire, I do not know him."

"Bravo!" murmured D'Artagnan.

"M. de Manicamp, hand your sword to the captain."

Manicamp bowed very gracefully, unbuckled his sword, smiling as he did so, and handed it to the musketeer to take. But De Saint-Aignan advanced hurriedly between him and D'Artagnan. "Sire," he said, "will your Majesty permit me to say a word?"

"Do so," said the king, delighted perhaps at the bottom of his heart to have some one step between him and the wrath which he felt had carried him too far.

"Manicamp, you are a brave man, and the king will

appreciate your conduct; but to wish to serve your friends too well, is to destroy them. Manicamp, you know the name the king asks you for?"

"It is perfectly true; I do know it."

"You will tell it, then?"

"If I felt that I ought to have told it, I should have already done so."

"Then I will tell it, for I am not so extremely sensitive on such points of honor as you are."

"You are at liberty to do so; but it seems to me, however —"

"Oh, a truce to magnanimity! I will not permit you to go to the Bastille in that way. Do you speak; or I will."

Manicamp was keen-witted enough, and perfectly understood that he had done quite sufficient to produce a good opinion of his conduct; it was now only a question of persevering in such a manner as to regain the good graces of the king. "Speak, Monsieur!" he said to De Saint-Aignan. "I have on my own behalf done all that my conscience told me to do, and it must have been very importunate," he added, turning towards the king, "since its dictates led me to disobey your Majesty's commands; but your Majesty will forgive me, I hope, when you learn that I was anxious to preserve the honor of a lady."

"Of a lady?" asked the king, with some uneasiness.

"Yes, Sire."

"A lady was the cause of this duel?"

Manicamp bowed.

The king rose and approached Manicamp. "If the position of the lady in question warrants it," he said, "I shall not complain of your having acted with so much circumspection; quite the contrary, indeed."

"Sire, everything which concerns your Majesty's house

hold, or the household of your Majesty's brother, is of importance in my eyes."

"My brother's household?" repeated Louis XIV., with a slight hesitation. "The cause of this duel was a lady belonging to my brother's household, do you say?"

"Or to Madame's."

"Ah! to Madame's?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Well — and this lady?"

"Is one of the maids of honor of the household of her royal Highness Madame la Duchesse d'Orléans."

"For whom M. de Guiche fought, do you say?"

"Yes, Sire; and this time I tell no falsehood."

Louis seemed restless and anxious. "Messieurs," he said, turning towards the spectators of this scene, "will you have the goodness to retire for a moment? I wish to be alone with M. de Manicamp. I know he has some very important communications to make for his own justification, and that he will not venture to give them before witnesses. Put up your sword, M. de Manicamp!"

Manicamp returned his sword to his belt.

"The fellow decidedly has his wits about him," murmured the musketeer, taking Saint-Aignan by the arm and withdrawing with him.

"He will get out of it," said the latter in D'Artagnan's ear.

"And with honor, too, Count."

Manicamp cast a glance of acknowledgment at Saint-Aignan and the captain, which passed unnoticed by the king.

"Well, well," said D'Artagnan, as he crossed the threshold, "I had an indifferent opinion of the new generation. Indeed, I was mistaken, after all, and these young fellows have some good in them."

Valot preceded the favorite and the captain, leaving the king and Manicamp alone in the cabinet.

CHAPTER XXVI.

WHEREIN D'ARTAGNAN PERCEIVES THAT IT WAS HE WHO WAS MISTAKEN, AND MANICAMP WHO WAS RIGHT.

THE king, determined to be satisfied that no one was listening, went himself to the door, and then returned quickly and placed himself opposite to Manicamp. "And now that we are alone, M. de Manicamp, explain yourself!"

"With the greatest frankness, Sire," replied the young man.

"And in the first place, pray understand," added the king, "that there is nothing to which I personally attach greater importance than the honor of any lady."

"That is the very reason, Sire, why I endeavored to study your delicacy of feeling."

"Yes, I understand it all now. You say that it was one of my sister-in-law's maids of honor who was the subject of dispute, and that the person in question, Guiche's adversary, the man, in fact, whom you will not name — "

"But whom M. de Saint-Aignan will name, Sire."

"Yes; you say, however, that this man has offended some one belonging to the household of Madame."

"Yes, Sire, Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"Ah!" said the king, as if he had expected the name, and yet as if its announcement had caused him a sudden pang, — "ah! it was Mademoiselle de la Vallière who was insulted."

"I do not say precisely that she was insulted, Sire."

"But at all events — "

"I merely say that she was spoken of in terms far from respectful."

"A man dares to speak in disrespectful terms of Mademoiselle de la Valliere, and yet you refuse to tell me the name of the insulter!"

"Sire, I thought it was quite understood that your Majesty had abandoned the idea of making me denounce him."

"Perfectly true, you are right," returned the king, controlling his anger; "besides, I shall know in sufficient time the name of the man whom I shall feel it my duty to punish."

Manicamp perceived that they had returned to the question again. As for the king, he saw that he had allowed himself to be carried a little too far, and he therefore continued: "And I will punish him, not because there is any question of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, although I esteem her very highly, but because a lady was the object of the quarrel. And I intend that ladies shall be respected at my court, and that quarrels shall be put a stop to altogether."

Manicamp bowed.

"And now, M. de Manicamp," continued the king, "what was said about Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"Cannot your Majesty guess?"

"I?"

"Your Majesty can imagine the character of the jests in which young men permit themselves to indulge."

"They very probably said that she was in love with some one?" the king ventured to remark.

"Probably so."

"But Mademoiselle de la Vallière has a perfect right to love any one she pleases," said the king.

"That is the very point De Guiche maintained."

"And was it for that reason he fought?"

"Yes, Sire, for that reason alone."

The king colored. "And you do not know anything more, then?"

"In what respect, Sire?"

"In the very interesting respect to which you just now referred."

"What does your Majesty wish to know?"

"Well, for instance, the name of the man with whom La Vallière is in love, and whom De Guiche's adversary disputed her right to love."

"Sire, I know nothing — I have heard nothing — and have learned nothing, even accidentally; but De Guiche is a noble-hearted fellow, and if momentarily he substituted himself in the place of La Vallière's protector, it was because that protector was of too exalted a position to undertake her defence himself."

These words were more than transparent; they made the king blush, but this time with pleasure. He struck Manicamp gently on the shoulder.

"Well, well, M. de Manicamp, you are not only a keen-witted fellow, but a brave gentleman besides, and your friend De Guiche is a paladin quite after my own heart; you will express that to him, will you not?"

"Your Majesty forgives me, then?"

"Completely."

"And I am free?"

The king smiled and held out his hand to Manicamp, which he took and kissed respectfully. "And then," added the king, "you relate stories so charmingly."

"I, Sire!"

"You told me in the most admirable manner the particulars of the accident which happened to De Guiche. I can see the wild boar rushing out of the wood, — I can

see the horse fall down, and the boar rush from the horse to the rider. You do not simply relate a story well, Monsieur, but you positively paint its incidents."

"Sire, I think that your Majesty deigns to laugh at my expense," said Manicamp.

"On the contrary," said Louis XIV. seriously, "I have so little intention of laughing, M. de Manicamp, that I wish you to relate this adventure to every one."

"The adventure of the hunt?"

"Yes; in the same manner in which you told it to me, without changing a single word, you understand."

"Perfectly, Sire."

"And you will relate it, then?"

"Without losing a minute."

"Very well! and now summon M. d'Artagnan; I hope you are no longer afraid of him."

"Oh, Sire, from the very moment when I am sure of your Majesty's kindness towards me, I no longer fear anything!"

"Call him, then!" said the king.

Manicamp opened the door, and said, "Messieurs, the king summons you."

D'Artagnan, De Saint-Aignan, and Valot returned.

"Messieurs," said the king, "I summoned you for the purpose of saying that M. de Manicamp's explanation has entirely satisfied me."

D'Artagnan glanced at Valot and De Saint-Aignan, as much as to say, "Well, did I not tell you so?"

The king led Manicamp aside to the door, and then in a low tone said, "See that M. de Guiche takes good care of himself, and particularly that he recovers as soon as possible. I am very desirous of thanking him in the name of every lady; but let him take special care that he does not begin again."

"Were he to die a hundred times, Sire, he would begin again if your Majesty's honor were in any way called in question."

This remark was direct enough. But we have already said that the incense of flattery was very pleasing to King Louis XIV., and provided he received it, he was not very particular as to its quality.

"Very well, very well," he said, as he dismissed Manicamp, "I will see De Guiche myself, and make him listen to reason;" and as Manicamp retreated from the apartment, the king turned round towards the three spectators of this scene, and said, "Tell me, M. d'Artagnan, how does it happen that your sight is so imperfect?—you, whose eyes are generally so very good."

"My sight bad, Sire?"

"Certainly."

"It must be the case since your Majesty says so; but in what respect may I ask?"

"Why, with regard to what occurred in the Rochin woods."

"Ah!"

"Certainly. You pretend to have seen the tracks of two horses, to have detected the footprints of two men; and have described the particulars of an engagement which you assert took place. Nothing of the sort occurred,—pure illusion on your part."

"Ah!" said D'Artagnan, again.

"Exactly the same thing with the galloping to and fro of the horses, and the other indications of a struggle. It was the struggle of De Guiche against the wild boar, and nothing else; only the struggle was a long and a terrible one, it seems."

"Ah!" continued D'Artagnan.

"And when I think that for a moment I almost

believed such a mistake — but, then, you spoke with such confidence."

"In fact, Sire, I must have been very short-sighted," said D'Artagnan, with a readiness of humor which delighted the king.

"You do admit it, then?"

"Admit it, Sire! most assuredly I do."

"So that now you see the thing — "

"In quite a different light from what I saw it half an hour ago."

"And to what, then, do you attribute this difference in your opinion?"

"Oh, a very simple thing, Sire! Half an hour ago I returned from the Rochin wood, where I had nothing to light me but a wretched stable lantern — "

"While now — "

"While now I have all the wax lights of your cabinet, and more than that, your Majesty's own eyes, which illuminate everything, like the blazing sun at noonday."

The king began to laugh, and De Saint-Aignan broke out into convulsions of merriment.

"It is precisely like M. Valot," said D'Artagnan, resuming the conversation where the king had left off; "he has been imagining all along that not only was M. de Guiche wounded by a bullet, but still more that he extracted a bullet, even, from his chest."

"Upon my word," said Valot, "I assure you — "

"Now, did you not believe that?" continued D'Artagnan.

"Yes," said Valot; "not only did I believe it, but at this very moment I would swear to it."

"Well, my dear doctor, you have dreamed it!"

"I have dreamed it!"

"M. de Guiche's wound, a mere dream; the bullet, a dream. So take my advice, and say no more about it."

"Well said," returned the king; "M. d'Artagnan's advice is very good. Do not speak of your dream to any one, M. Valot; and, upon the word of a gentleman, you will have no occasion to repent it. Good evening, Messieurs; a very sad affair, indeed, is a wild-boar hunt!"

"A very serious thing, indeed," repeated D'Artagnan, in a loud voice, "is a wild-boar hunt!" and he repeated that remark in every room through which he passed, and left the château, taking Valot with him.

"And now that we are alone," said the king to De Saint-Aignan, "what is the name of De Guiche's adversary?"

De Saint-Aignan looked at the king.

"Oh, do not hesitate!" said the king; "you know that I must forgive."

"De Wardes," said De Saint-Aignan.

"Very good," said Louis XIV.; and then hastily retiring to his own room, he added to himself, "To forgive is not to forget."

CHAPTER XXVII.

SHOWING THE ADVANTAGE OF HAVING TWO STRINGS TO ONE'S BOW.

MANICAMP quitted the king's apartment delighted at having succeeded so well, when, just as he reached the bottom of the staircase and was about passing before a doorway, he felt some one suddenly pull him by the sleeve. He turned and recognized Montalais, who was waiting for him in the passage, and who in a very mysterious manner, with her body bent forward, and in a low tone of voice, said to him, "Monsieur, come quick, I pray you!"

"Where to, Mademoiselle?" inquired Manicamp.

"In the first place, a true knight would not have asked such a question, but would have followed without requiring any explanation."

"Well, Mademoiselle," said Manicamp, "I am quite ready to conduct myself as a true knight."

"No, it is too late, and you cannot take the credit of it. We are going to Madame's apartments; so come at once."

"Ah!" said Manicamp; "lead on, then!" and he followed Montalais, who ran before him as lightly as Galatea.

"This time," said Manicamp, as he followed his guide, "I do not think that stories about hunting expeditions would be acceptable. We will try, however, and if need be — why, if need be, we must find something else."

Montalais still ran on.

"How fatiguing it is," thought Manicamp, "to have need of one's head and legs at the same time!"

At last, however, they arrived. Madame had just finished her toilet for the night, and was in a most elegant *déshabille;* but it must be understood that she had changed her dress before she had any idea of being subjected to the emotions which agitated her. She was waiting with the most restless impatience, and Montalais and Manicamp found her standing near the door. At the sound of their approaching footsteps Madame came forward to meet them. "Ah!" she said, "at last!"

"Here is M. Manicamp," replied Montalais.

Manicamp bowed with the greatest respect. Madame signed to Montalais to withdraw, and she immediately obeyed. Madame followed her with her eyes in silence until the door closed behind her, and then turning to Manicamp said, "What is the matter? And is it true, as I am told, M. de Manicamp, that some one is lying wounded in the château?"

"Yes, Madame, unfortunately so, — M. de Guiche."

"Yes, M. de Guiche," repeated the princess. "I had, in fact, heard it rumored, but not confirmed. And so, in perfect truth, it is M. de Guiche who has met this misfortune?"

"M. de Guiche himself, Madame."

"Are you aware, M. de Manicamp," said the princess, hastily, "that the king has the strongest antipathy to duels?"

"Perfectly so, Madame; but a duel with a wild beast is not amenable to his Majesty."

"Oh, you will not insult me by supposing that I should credit the absurd fable which has been reported — with what object I cannot tell — respecting M. de Guiche's having been wounded by a wild boar. No, no, Monsieur, the real truth is known; and at this moment, in addition to the inconvenience of his wound, M. de Guiche runs the risk of losing his liberty."

"Alas, Madame," said Manicamp, "I am well aware of that; but what is to be done?"

"You have seen his Majesty?"

"Yes, Madame."

"What did you say to him?"

"I told him how M. de Guiche had been to the chase, and how a wild boar had rushed forth out of the Rochin wood; how M. de Guiche fired at it, and how, in fact, the furious brute dashed at the hunter, killed his horse, and grievously wounded himself."

"And the king believed that?"

"Perfectly."

"Oh, you surprise me, M. de Manicamp; you surprise me very much!" and Madame walked up and down the room, casting a searching look from time to time at Manicamp, who remained motionless and impassive in the same position that he had taken on his entrance. At last she stopped. "And yet," she said, "every one here seems agreed in giving another cause for this wound."

"What cause, Madame?" said Manicamp; "may I be permitted, without indiscretion, to ask your Highness that question?"

"You ask that! — you, M. de Guiche's intimate friend, his confidant, indeed!"

"Oh, Madame! the intimate friend — yes; the confidant — no. De Guiche is one of those men who can keep his own secrets, — who has some of his own, certainly, but who never breathes a syllable about them. De Guiche is discretion itself, Madame."

"Very well, then; those secrets which M. de Guiche keeps so scrupulously, I shall have the pleasure of acquainting you with," said the princess, spitefully. "For the king may possibly question you a second time; and if

on the second occasion you were to repeat the same story that you told him at first, he possibly might not be very well satisfied with it."

"But, Madame, I think your Highness is mistaken with regard to the king. His Majesty has been perfectly satisfied with me, I assure you."

"In that case, permit me to tell you, M. de Manicamp, it only shows that his Majesty is very easily satisfied."

"I think that your Highness is wrong in arriving at such an opinion; his Majesty is well known not to be contented except with very good reasons."

"And do you suppose that he will thank you for your officious falsehood, when he learns to-morrow that M. de Guiche had, on behalf of his friend M. de Bragelonne, a quarrel which ended in an hostile meeting?"

"A quarrel on M. de Bragelonne's account!" said Manicamp, with the most innocent expression in the world; "what does your royal Highness do me the honor to tell me?"

"What is there astonishing in that? M. de Guiche is sensitive, irritable, and easily loses his temper."

"On the contrary, Madame, I consider M. de Guiche to be very patient, and never sensitive or irritable except upon very good grounds."

"But is not friendship a just ground?" said the princess.

"Oh, certainly, Madame; and particularly for a heart like his!"

"Very good; you will not deny, I suppose, that M. de Bragelonne is M. de Guiche's friend?"

"A very great friend."

"Well, then, M. de Guiche has taken M. de Bragelonne's part; and as M. de Bragelonne was absent and could not fight, he fought for him."

Manicamp began to smile, and moved his head and shoulders very slightly, as much as to say, "Oh, if you will positively have it so —"

"But speak, at all events," said the princess, out of patience; "speak!"

"I?"

"Of course; it is quite clear that you are not of my opinion, and that you have something to say."

"I have only one thing to say, Madame."

"Say it!"

"That I do not understand a single word of what you have just done me the honor of telling me."

"What! you do not understand a single word about M. de Guiche's quarrel with M. de Wardes!" exclaimed the princess, almost out of temper.

Manicamp remained silent.

"A quarrel," Madame continued, "which arose out of a conversation more or less scandalous in its tone and purport, and more or less well founded, respecting the virtue of a certain lady."

"Ah! of a certain lady, — that is quite another thing," said Manicamp.

"You begin to understand, do you not?"

"Your Highness will excuse me, but I dare not —"

"You dare not," said Madame, exasperated; "very well, then, wait one moment, and I will dare."

"Madame, Madame!" exclaimed Manicamp, as if in great dismay, "be careful of what you are going to say!"

"It would seem, Monsieur, that if I happened to be a man, you would challenge me, notwithstanding his Majesty's edicts, as M. de Guiche challenged M. de Wardes; and that, too, on account of the virtue of Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"Of Mademoiselle de la Vallière!" exclaimed Mani-

camp, starting backwards, as if hers were the very last name he expected to hear pronounced.

"What makes you start in that manner, M. de Manicamp?" said Madame, ironically; "do you mean to say that you would be impertinent enough to suspect that young lady's honor?"

"Madame, in the whole course of this affair there has not been the slightest question of Mademoiselle de la Vallière's honor."

"What! when two men have almost blown each other's brains out on a woman's behalf, do you mean to say that she has had nothing to do with the affair, and that her name has not been called in question at all? I did not think you so good a courtier, M. de Manicamp."

"Pray forgive me, Madame," said the young man; "but we are very far from understanding each other. You do me the honor to speak one kind of language, while I, it seems, am speaking altogether another."

"I beg your pardon, but I do not understand your meaning."

"Forgive me, then; but I fancied I understood your Highness to remark that Messieurs de Guiche and de Wardes had fought on Mademoiselle de la Vallière's account."

"Certainly."

"On account of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, I think you said!" repeated Manicamp.

"I do not say that M. de Guiche personally took an interest in Mademoiselle de la Vallière, but I say that he did so as representing or acting on behalf of another."

"On behalf of another!"

"Come, do not always assume such a bewildered look! Does not every one here know that M. de Bragelonne is affianced to Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and that before he went on the mission to London with which the king

intrusted him, he charged his friend M. de Guiche to watch over that interesting young lady?"

"Ah! there is nothing more for me to say, then. Your Highness is well-informed."

"Of everything; so I beg you to understand that clearly."

Manicamp began to laugh, — which almost exasperated the princess, who was not, as we know, of a very patient and enduring disposition.

"Madame," resumed the discreet Manicamp, bowing to the princess, "let us bury this affair altogether in forgetfulness, for it will never be quite cleared up."

"Oh! so far as that goes there is nothing more to be done, and the information is complete. The king will learn that De Guiche has taken up the cause of this little adventuress, who gives herself all the airs of a grand lady; he will learn that M. de Bragelonne having nominated his friend M. de Guiche his guardian-in-ordinary of the garden of the Hesperides, the latter immediately fastened, as he was required to do, upon M. de Wardes, who ventured to touch the golden apple. Moreover, you cannot pretend to deny, M. de Manicamp, — you who know everything so well, — that the king, on his side, casts a longing eye upon this famous treasure, and that he very likely will bear no slight grudge against M. de Guiche for constituting himself the defender of it. Are you sufficiently well informed now, or do you require anything further? If so, speak, Monsieur!"

"No, Madame, there is nothing more that I wish to know."

"Learn, however, — for you ought to know it, M. de Manicamp, — learn that his Majesty's indignation will be followed by terrible consequences. In princes of a similar temperament to that of his Majesty, the passion which jealousy causes sweeps down like a whirlwind."

"Which you will temper, Madame."

"I!" exclaimed the princess, with a gesture of indescribable irony, — "I! and by what right, may I ask?"

"Because you dislike injustice, Madame."

"And according to your account, then, it would be an injustice to prevent the king from arranging his love-affairs as he pleases."

"You will intercede, however, in M. de Guiche's favor?"

"You are mad, Monsieur," said the princess, in a haughty tone.

"On the contrary, Madame, I am in the most perfect possession of my senses; and, I repeat, you will defend M. de Guiche before the king"

"Why should I?"

"Because the cause of M. de Guiche is your own, Madame," said Manicamp in a low voice, with all the ardor with which his eyes were kindled.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, Madame, that with respect to the defence which M. de Guiche undertook in M. de Bragelonne's absence, I am surprised that your Highness has not detected a pretext in La Vallière's name having been brought forward."

"A pretext — but a pretext for what?" repeated the princess, hesitatingly, for Manicamp's steady look had just revealed something of the truth to her.

"I trust, Madame," said the young man, "that I have now said sufficient to induce your Highness not to overwhelm before his Majesty my poor friend De Guiche, against whom all the malevolence of a party bitterly opposed to your own will now be directed."

"You mean, on the contrary, I suppose, that all those who have no great affection for Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and even perhaps a few of those who have some regard for her, will be angry with the count?"

"Oh, Madame! why will you push your obstinacy so far, and refuse to open your ears and listen to the words of a devoted friend? Must I expose myself to the risk of your displeasure? Must I name, contrary to my own wish, the person who was the real cause of this quarrel?"

"The person?" said Madame, blushing.

"Must I," continued Manicamp, "tell you how poor De Guiche became irritated, furious, exasperated beyond all control, at the different rumors which are circulating about this person? Must I, if you persist in this wilful blindness, and if respect should continue to prevent my naming her, — must I, I repeat, recall to your recollection the various scenes which Monsieur had with the Duke of Buckingham, and the insinuations which were let fall respecting the Duke's departure? Must I remind you of the anxious care the count always took in his efforts to please, to watch, to protect that person for whom alone he lives, for whom alone he breathes? Well, I will do so; and when I shall have made you recall all that, you will perhaps understand how it happened that the count, at the end of his patience, and having been for some time past tormented by De Wardes, became, at the first disrespectful expression which the latter pronounced respecting the person in question, inflamed with passion, and panted for vengeance."

The princess concealed her face in her hands. "Monsieur, Monsieur!" she exclaimed; "do you know what you are saying, and to whom you are speaking?"

"Therefore, Madame," pursued Manicamp, as if he had not heard the exclamations of the princess, "nothing will astonish you any longer, — neither the count's ardor in seeking this quarrel, nor his wonderful address in transferring it to grounds foreign to your own personal interests. That latter circumstance was, indeed, a marvellous

instance of tact and self-possession; and if the person in whose behalf the Comte de Guiche so fought and shed his blood does in reality owe some gratitude to the poor wounded sufferer, it is not indeed on account of the blood he has shed, or for the agony he has suffered, but for the steps he has taken to preserve from comment or reflection an honor which is more precious to him than his own."

"Oh!" cried Madame, as if she had been alone, "is it possible that the quarrel was on my account?"

Manicamp felt that he could now breathe for a moment, and gallantly had he won the right to do so. Madame, on her side, remained for some time plunged in a painful reverie. Her agitation could be seen by her panting bosom, by her languishing looks, by the frequency with which she pressed her hand upon her heart. But in her coquetry was not so much a passive quality; it was, on the contrary, a fire which sought for fuel to maintain itself, and which found what it required.

"If it be as you assert," she said, "the count will have obliged two persons at the same time; for M. de Bragelonne also owes a deep debt of gratitude to M. de Guiche, — and with far greater reason, indeed, because everywhere and on every occasion Mademoiselle de la Vallière will be regarded as having been defended by this generous champion."

Manicamp perceived that there still remained some lingering doubt in the princess's heart. "A truly admirable service, indeed," he said, "is the one he has rendered to Mademoiselle de la Vallière! A truly admirable service to M. de Bragelonne! The duel has created a sensation which in some respects casts a dishonorable suspicion upon that young girl, — a sensation which will of necessity embroil her with the viscount. The consequence is, that De Wardes's pistol-bullet has had three results instead of

one, — it destroys at the same time the honor of a woman and the happiness of a man, and perhaps it has wounded to death one of the best gentlemen in France. Oh, Madame! your logic is very cold; it always condemns, — it never absolves."

Manicamp's concluding words scattered to the winds the last doubt which lingered, not in Madame's heart, but in her head. She was no longer a princess with her scruples, nor a woman with her returning suspicions; she was one whose heart had just felt the mortal chill of a wound. "Wounded to death!" she murmured, in a faltering voice, "oh, M. de Manicamp! did you not say wounded to death?"

Manicamp returned no other answer than a deep sigh.

"And so you said that the count is dangerously wounded?" continued the princess.

"Yes, Madame; one of his hands is shattered, and he has a bullet lodged in his breast."

"Gracious heavens!" resumed the princess, with a feverish excitement, "this is horrible, M. de Manicamp! A hand shattered, do you say, and a bullet in his breast? And that coward, that wretch, that assassin, De Wardes, who did it! Heaven is unjust!"

Manicamp seemed overcome by violent emotion. He had, in fact, displayed no little energy in the latter part of his speech. As for Madame, she no longer regarded conventional proprieties; for when with her passion spoke in accents either of anger or of sympathy, nothing could any longer restrain her impulses. Madame approached Manicamp, who had sunk down upon a seat, as if his grief were a sufficiently powerful excuse for committing an infraction of one of the laws of etiquette. "Monsieur," she said, seizing him by the hand, "be frank with me!"

Manicamp raised his head.

"Is M. de Guiche in danger of death?"

"Doubly so, Madame," he replied; "in the first place on account of the hemorrhage which has taken place, an artery having been injured in the hand; and next, in consequence of the wound in his breast, which may — the doctor is afraid of it, at least — have injured some vital part."

"He may die, then?"

"Die? — yes, Madame; and without even having the consolation of knowing that you were aware of his devotion."

"You will tell him."

"I?"

"Yes; are you not his friend?"

"I? Oh, no, Madame! I will only tell M. de Guiche, if indeed the poor fellow is still in a condition to hear me, — I will only tell him what I have seen, — that is, your cruelty towards him."

"Oh, Monsieur, you surely will not be guilty of such barbarity!"

"Indeed, Madame, I shall speak the truth, for Nature is very energetic in a man of his age. The physicians are skilful men, and if by chance the poor count should survive his wound, I should not wish him still to be exposed to dying of a wound of the heart, after having escaped that of the body;" and with these words Manicamp rose, and with an expression of profound respect seemed to be desirous of taking leave.

"At least, Monsieur," said Madame, stopping him with almost a suppliant air, "you will be kind enough to tell me in what state your wounded friend is, and who is the physician who attends him?"

"As regards the state he is in, Madame, he is seriously ill; his physician is M. Valot, his Majesty's private medi-

cal attendant. M. Valot is, moreover, assisted by a professional friend, to whose house M. de Guiche has been carried."

"What! he is not in the château?" said Madame.

"Alas, Madame! the poor fellow was so ill that he could not even be conveyed hither."

"Give me the address, Monsieur," said the princess, hurriedly; "I will send to inquire after him."

"Rue du Feurre; a brick house, with white blinds. The doctor's name is on the door."

"You are returning to your wounded friend, M. de Manicamp?"

"Yes, Madame."

"You will be able, then, to do me a service?"

"I am at your Highness's orders."

"Do what you intended to do, — return to M. de Guiche, send away all those whom you may find there, and have the kindness yourself to go away too."

"Madame — "

"Let us waste no time in useless explanations. That is what I require; see nothing in it beyond what there really is, and ask nothing further than what I tell you. I am going to send one of my ladies, perhaps two, because it is now getting late. I do not wish them to see you, or, to be more frank, I do not wish you to see them. These are scruples which you can understand, — you particularly, M. de Manicamp, who seem to be capable of divining everything."

"Oh, Madame, perfectly! I can even do better still. I will walk in advance of your messengers; it will at the same time be a means of showing them the way more accurately, and of protecting them if it should happen that they needed protection, although there is no probability of it!"

"And in this way, then, they would be sure of entering without any difficulty, would they not?"

"Certainly, Madame; for as I should be the first to pass, I should remove any difficulties which might chance to be in the way."

"Very well; go, go, M. de Manicamp, and wait at the bottom of the staircase."

"I go at once, Madame."

"Stay!" Manicamp paused. "When you hear the footsteps of two women descending the stairs, go out, and without once turning round, take the road which leads to where the poor count is lying"

"But if, by any mischance, two other persons were to descend, and I were to be mistaken?"

"You will hear one of the two clap her hands together very softly three times. So, go!"

"Yes, Madame;" and Manicamp turned, bowed once more, and left the room, his heart overflowing with joy. In fact, he knew very well that the presence of Madame herself would be the best balm to apply to his friend's wounds. A quarter of an hour had hardly elapsed when he heard the sound of a door opened softly, and closed with the same precaution. He then heard light footfalls gliding down the staircase, and then three strokes with the hands, — that is to say, the signal agreed upon. He immediately went out, and faithful to his promise bent his way, without once turning his head, through the streets of Fontainebleau towards the doctor's dwelling.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MALICORNE THE KEEPER OF THE RECORDS OF THE KINGDOM OF FRANCE.

Two women, whose figures were completely concealed by their mantles, and whose black velvet masks effectually hid the upper portion of their faces, timidly followed Manicamp's steps. On the first floor, behind curtains of red damask, the soft light of a lamp placed upon a sideboard illumined a room, at the other extremity of which, on a large bedstead supported by spiral columns, around which curtains of the same color as those that deadened the rays of the lamp had been closely drawn, lay De Guiche, his head supported by pillows, his eyes looking as if the mists of death were gathering there; his long black hair, scattered in ringlets over the pillow, by its disorder made more prominent the hollowed and pale temples of the young man. It could easily be perceived that fever was the principal occupant of that chamber. De Guiche was dreaming. His wandering mind was pursuing, through gloom and mystery, one of those wild creations which delirium engenders. Two or three drops of blood, still liquid, stained the floor.

Manicamp hurriedly ran up the stairs, but paused at the threshold, gently opened the door, looked into the room, and seeing that everything was perfectly quiet, advanced on tiptoe to the large leathern arm-chair, a specimen of furniture of the reign of Henry IV., and seeing that the nurse, as a matter of course, had dropped off to

sleep, awoke her, and begged her to pass into the adjoining room. Then, standing by the side of the bed, he remained for a moment deliberating whether it would be better to awaken De Guiche, in order to acquaint him with the good news. But as he began to hear behind the door the rustling of the silken dresses and the hurried breathing of those who had accompanied him, and as he already saw that the curtain which hung before the doorway seemed about to be drawn aside, he passed round the bed and followed the nurse into the next room. As soon as he had disappeared, the curtain was raised, and the two ladies entered the room he had just left.

The one who entered first made a gesture to her companion which caused her to take her position on a chair close to the door. Then she resolutely advanced towards the bed, drew back the curtains along the iron rod, and threw them in thick folds behind the head of the bed. She gazed upon the count's pallid face, remarked his right hand enveloped in linen whose dazzling whiteness was made more prominent by the counterpane covered with dark leaves which was thrown across a portion of this bed of pain. She shuddered as she saw a spot of blood becoming larger and larger upon the linen bandages. The young man's white chest was quite uncovered, as if the cool night air might assist his respiration. A small bandage fastened the dressings of the wound, around which a bluish circle of extravasated blood was gradually increasing in size. A deep sigh broke from the lips of the young woman. She leaned against one of the columns of the bed, and gazed, through the holes in her mask, upon the harrowing spectacle before her. A hoarse harsh sigh passed like a death-rattle through the count's clinched teeth. The masked lady seized his left hand, which felt as hot as burning coals. But at the very moment she

placed her icy hand upon it, the action of the cold was such that De Guiche opened his eyes, and with a look of reviving intelligence seemed as if struggling back again into existence. The first thing upon which he fixed his gaze was this phantom standing erect by his bedside. At that sight his eyes became dilated, but without any appearance of consciousness in them. The lady thereupon made a sign to her companion, who had remained near the door; and in all probability the latter had already received her lesson, for in a clear tone of voice, and without any hesitation whatever, she pronounced these words: "Monsieur the Count, her royal Highness Madame is desirous of knowing how you are bearing up under the pain of your wound, and to express to you, by my lips, her great regret at seeing you suffer."

As she pronounced the word "Madame," De Guiche started; he had not as yet noticed the person to whom the voice belonged, and he naturally turned towards the direction whence it proceeded. But as he felt the cold hand still resting on his own, he again turned to look at the motionless figure beside him. "Was it you who spoke to me, Madame?" he asked, in a weak voice, "or is there another person besides you in the room?"

"Yes," replied the figure, in an almost unintelligible voice, as she bent down her head.

"Well!" said the wounded man, with a great effort, "I thank you. Tell Madame that I no longer regret dying, since she has remembered me."

At this word "dying," pronounced by this seemingly dying man, the masked lady could not restrain her tears, which flowed under her mask, and appeared upon her cheeks just where the mask left her face bare. If De Guiche had been in fuller possession of his senses, he would have seen her tears roll like glistening pearls, and

fall upon his bed. The lady, forgetting that she wore a mask, raised her hand as though to wipe her eyes, and meeting the rough cold velvet, she tore away her mask in anger and threw it on the floor. At the unexpected apparition before him, which seemed to issue from a cloud, De Guiche uttered a cry and stretched out his arms towards her; but every word perished on his lips, and his strength seemed utterly abandoning him. His right hand, which had followed his first impulse without calculating the amount of strength he had left, fell back again upon the bed, and immediately afterwards the white linen was reddened with a larger spot than before. In the mean time the young man's eyes became dim, and closed as if he were already struggling with the unconquerable angel of death; and then, after a few involuntary movements, his head fell back motionless on his pillow, — from pale he had become livid. The lady was frightened; but now, contrary to its usual character, fright was fascinating. She leaned over the young man, gazed earnestly at his pale and cold face, which she was almost touching, then imprinted a rapid kiss upon the left hand of De Guiche, who, trembling as if an electric shock had passed through him, awoke a second time, opened his large eyes, incapable of recognition, and again fell into a state of complete insensibility. "Come," she said to her companion, "we must not remain here any longer; I shall be committing some folly or other."

"Madame, Madame, your Highness is forgetting your mask!" said her vigilant companion.

"Pick it up," replied her mistress, as she tottered distracted towards the staircase; and as the street-door had been left only half closed, the two women, light as birds, passed through it, and with hurried steps returned to the palace. One of them ascended towards Madame's apart-

ments, where she disappeared; the other entered the room belonging to the maids of honor, namely, on the *entresol*, and having reached her own room, sat down before a table, and without giving herself time even to breathe, wrote the following letter:—

"This evening Madame has been to see M. de Guiche. Everything is going on well on this side. See that yours is the same, and do not forget to burn this paper."

She then folded the letter in a long thin form, and leaving her room with every possible precaution crossed a corridor which led to the apartments appropriated to the gentlemen attached to Monsieur's service. She stopped before a door, under which, having previously given two short, quick knocks, she thrust the paper and fled. Then, returning to her own room, she removed every trace of her having gone out and also of having written the letter. Amid the investigations she was so diligently pursuing for this purpose, she perceived on the table the mask which belonged to Madame, and which, according to her mistress's directions, she had brought back, but had forgotten to restore to her. "Oh!" she said, "I must not forget to do to-morrow what I have forgotten to do to-day."

And she took hold of the velvet mask by that part of it which covered the cheeks, and feeling that her thumb was wet, she looked at it. It was not only wet, but reddened. The mask had fallen upon one of the spots of blood which we have already said stained the floor; and from the black velvet outside, which had accidentally come into contact with it, the blood had passed through to the inside and stained the white cambric lining. "Oh!" said Montalais, for doubtless our readers have already recognized her by these various manœuvres, "I

shall not give her back her mask; it is far too precious now;" and rising from her seat, she ran to a box made of maple-wood, which enclosed different toilet articles and perfumery. "No, not here," she said; "such a treasure must not be abandoned to the slightest chance of detection."

Then, after a moment's silence, and with a smile which was peculiarly her own, she added: "Beautiful mask, stained with the blood of that brave knight, you shall go and join that collection of wonders, La Vallière's and Raoul's letters, — that loving collection, indeed, which will some day or other form part of the history of France and of royalty. You shall be taken under M. Malicorne's care," said the laughing girl, as she began to undress herself, — "under the protection of that worthy M. Malicorne," she said, blowing out the taper, "who thinks he was born only to become the master of apartments to Monsieur, and whom I will make keeper of the records and historiographer of the house of Bourbon and of the first families in the kingdom. Let him grumble now, that discontented Malicorne!" and she drew the curtains and fell fast asleep.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE JOURNEY.

THE next day being agreed upon for the departure, the king, at eleven o'clock precisely, descended the grand staircase with the two queens and Madame, in order to enter his carriage drawn by six horses, which were pawing the ground in impatience at the foot of the steps. The whole court awaited the royal appearance in the Fer-à-Cheval, in their travelling costumes; the large number of saddled horses and carriages of ladies and gentlemen of the court, surrounded by their attendants, servants, and pages, formed a brilliant spectacle. The king entered his carriage with the two queens; Madame entered a carriage with Monsieur. The maids of honor followed the example, and took their seats, two by two, in the carriages provided for them. The king's carriage headed the procession; then came that of Madame; then the others followed according to etiquette and rank. The weather was very warm; a light breeze, which early in the morning all had thought sufficient to cool the air, soon became fiercely heated by the rays of the sun, lying in wait behind the clouds, and filtered through the heated vapor which rose from the ground only as a scorching wind, bearing particles of fine dust against the faces of the impatient travellers. Madame was the first to complain of the heat. Monsieur's only reply was to throw himself back in the carriage, as if he were about to faint, and to inundate himself with salts and perfumes, uttering the

deepest sighs all the while; whereupon Madame said to him, with her most amiable expression, "Really, Monsieur, I fancied that you would have been polite enough, on account of the terrible heat, to have left me my carriage to myself, and to have performed the journey yourself on horseback."

"Ride on horseback!" cried the prince, with an accent of dismay which showed how little idea he had of adopting this strange project; "you cannot be thinking of such a thing, Madame! My skin would peel off if I were to expose myself to such a burning air as this."

Madame began to laugh. "You can take my parasol," she said.

"But the trouble of holding it!" replied Monsieur, with the greatest coolness; "besides, I have no horse."

"How? no horse!" replied the princess, who, if she did not obtain the solitude she desired, at least obtained the amusement of teasing,—"no horse! You are mistaken, Monsieur; for I see your favorite bay out yonder."

"My bay horse!" exclaimed the prince, attempting to lean forward to look out of the door; but the movement he was obliged to make cost him so much trouble that he did not half finish it, and he hastened to resume his position of repose.

"Yes," said Madame; "your horse, led by M. de Malicorne."

"Poor beast!" replied the prince; "how warm he will be!"

And with these words he closed his eyes, like a man on the point of expiring. Madame, on her side, reclined indolently in the other corner of the carriage, and closed her eyes also, not however to sleep, but to think more at her ease. In the mean time the king, seated on the front seat of the carriage, the back seat of which he had yielded up

to the two queens, was a prey to that restless contrariness experienced by anxious lovers, who without being able to quench their ardent thirst are ceaselessly desirous of seeing the loved object, and then go away partially satisfied, without perceiving that they have acquired a more burning thirst than ever.

The king, whose carriage headed the procession, could not from the place he occupied perceive the carriages of the ladies and maids of honor, which came last. Besides, he was obliged to answer the eternal questions of the young queen, who, happy to have with her "*her dear husband*," as she called him, in utter forgetfulness of royal etiquette invested him with all her affection, stifled him with her attentions, afraid that some one might come to take him from her, or that he himself might suddenly take a fancy to leave her society. Anne of Austria, whom nothing at that moment disturbed except the occasional dull throbbings in her bosom, looked pleased and delighted, and although she perfectly conceived the king's impatience, tantalizingly prolonged his sufferings by unexpectedly resuming the conversation at the very moment when the king, absorbed in his own reflections, began to muse over his secret attachment.

Everything — the little attentions of the queen, and the queen-mother's tantalizing interruptions — seemed to combine to make the king's position almost insupportable; for he knew not how to control the restless longings of his heart. At first he complained of the heat, — a complaint which was merely preliminary to other complaints, but with sufficient tact to prevent Maria Theresa from guessing his real object. Understanding therefore the king's remark literally, she began to fan Louis with her ostrich plumes. But the heat passed away, and the king then complained of cramps and stiffness in his legs; and as the

carriages at that moment stopped to change horses, the queen said: "Shall I get out with you? I too feel tired of sitting. We can walk on a little distance; the carriages will overtake us, and we can resume our places again."

The king frowned; it is a hard trial to which a jealous woman subjects her husband whose fidelity she suspects, when, although herself a prey to jealousy, she watches herself so narrowly that she avoids giving any pretext for an angry feeling. The king, therefore, in the present case could not refuse; he accepted the offer, alighted from the carriage, gave his arm to the queen, and walked a short distance with her while the horses were being changed. As he walked along, he cast an envious glance upon the courtiers who were fortunate enough to be performing the journey on horseback.

The queen soon found out that walking pleased the king as little as riding in the carriage. She accordingly expressed a wish to return to her carriage; and the king conducted her to the door, but did not get in with her. He stepped back a few paces, and looked along the file of carriages to discover the one in which he took so strong an interest. At the door of the sixth carriage he saw La Vallière's fair countenance. As the king thus stood motionless, wrapped in thought, without perceiving that everything was ready, and that they were now waiting only for him, he heard a voice close beside him, addressing him in the most respectful manner. It was M. de Malicorne, in a complete costume of an equerry, holding over his left arm the bridles of two horses.

"Did your Majesty ask for a horse?" he said.

"A horse? Have you one of my horses here?" inquired the king, who endeavored to remember the person who addressed him, and whose face was not as yet very familiar to him.

"Sire," replied Malicorne, "at all events, I have a horse which is at your Majesty's service;" and Malicorne pointed to Monsieur's bay horse, which Madame had observed. It was a beautiful creature and most royally caparisoned.

"But this is not one of my horses, Monsieur," said the king.

"Sire, it is a horse out of his royal Highness's stables; but his royal Highness does not ride when the weather is so hot."

The king did not reply, but hastily approached the horse, which stood pawing the ground with his foot. Malicorne hastened to hold the stirrup for him, but his Majesty was already in the saddle. Restored to good humor by this lucky accident, the king hastened smilingly towards the queen's carriage, where he was anxiously expected; and notwithstanding Maria Theresa's preoccupied air, he said: "I have been fortunate enough to find this horse, and I intend to avail myself of it. I felt stifled in the carriage. Adieu, ladies!"

Then bending graciously over the arched neck of his steed, he disappeared in a second. Anne of Austria leaned forward, in order to look after him as he rode away; he did not go very far, for when he reached the sixth carriage, he reined in his horse suddenly and took off his hat. He saluted La Vallière, who uttered a cry of surprise as she saw him, blushing at the same time with pleasure. Montalais, who occupied the other seat in the carriage, made the king a most profound bow; and then, with all the tact of a woman, she pretended to be exceedingly interested in the landscape, and withdrew herself into the left-hand corner.

The conversation between the king and La Vallière began, as all lovers' conversations generally do, by eloquent



looks and by a few words devoid of meaning. The king explained how warm he had felt in his carriage, — so much so, indeed, that he had esteemed a horse as a benefaction. "And," he added, "my benefactor is an exceedingly intelligent man, for he seemed to guess my thoughts intuitively. I have now only one wish, that of learning the name of the gentleman who so cleverly served his king and extricated him from his painful weariness."

Montalais during this colloquy, the first words of which had awakened her attention, had slightly altered her position, and had contrived so as to meet the king's look as he finished his remark. It followed very naturally that the king looked inquiringly as much at her as at La Vallière; she had every reason to suppose that it was she who was appealed to, and consequently might be permitted to answer. She therefore said, "Sire, the horse which your Majesty is riding belongs to Monsieur, and was being led by one of his royal Highness's gentlemen."

"And what is that gentleman's name, may I ask, Mademoiselle?"

"M. de Malicorne, Sire."

The name produced its usual effect, for the king repeated it smilingly.

"Yes, Sire," replied Aure. "Stay! it is that gentleman who is galloping on my left hand;" and indeed she pointed out our Malicorne, who with a very sanctified expression was galloping on the left side of the carriage, knowing perfectly well that they were talking of him at that very moment, but sitting in his saddle as if he were deaf and dumb.

"Yes," said the king, "that is the gentleman. I remember his face, and will not forget his name;" and the king looked tenderly at La Vallière.

Aure had now nothing further to do. She had let Mali-

corne's name fall; the soil was good; all that was necessary now was to let the name take root, and the event would bear its fruit in due time. She consequently threw herself back in her corner, feeling perfectly justified in making as many agreeable signs of recognition as she liked to M. de Malicorne, since the latter had had the happiness of pleasing the king. As will very readily be believed, Montalais was not mistaken, and Malicorne, with his quick ear and his sly look, seemed to interpret her remark as "All goes on well," the whole being accompanied by a pantomime which he fancied conveyed something resembling a kiss.

"Alas! Mademoiselle," said the king, after a moment's pause, "the liberty and freedom of the country are soon about to cease; your attendance upon Madame will be more strictly enforced, and we shall see each other no more."

"Your Majesty is too much attached to Madame," replied Louise, "not to come to see her frequently; and whenever your Majesty may pass across the apartments —"

"Ah!" said the king, in a tender voice, which was gradually lowered in its tone, "to perceive is not to see, and yet it seems that it would be quite sufficient for you."

Louise did not answer; a sigh filled her heart almost to bursting, but she stifled it.

"You exercise a great control over yourself," said the king to Louise, who smiled upon him with a melancholy expression. "Exert the strength you have in loving fondly," he continued, "and I will bless Heaven for having bestowed it on you."

La Vallière still remained silent, but raised her eyes, brimful of affection, to the king. Louis, as if he had been overcome by this burning glance, passed his hand across his forehead, and pressing his horse's sides with his knees

made him bound several paces forward. La Vallière, leaning back in her carriage, with her eyes half closed, gazed fixedly upon this handsome cavalier, whose plumes were floating in the breeze; she could not but admire his graceful carriage, his delicate and nervous limbs, which pressed his horse's side, and the regular outline of his features, which his beautiful curling hair set off to great advantage, revealing occasionally his small and well-formed ear. In fact, the poor girl was in love, and she revelled in her love. In a few moments the king was again by her side.

"Do you not perceive," he said, "how terribly your silence affects me? Oh, Mademoiselle, how pitilessly immovable you would become if you were ever to resolve to break off all acquaintance with any one! And then, too, I think you changeable; in fact, — in fact, I dread this deep love which I have for you."

"Oh, Sire, you are mistaken!" said La Vallière; "if ever I love, it will be for my whole life."

"*If* you love, you say," exclaimed the king, sorrowfully; "you do not love now, then." She hid her face in her hands. "You see," said the king, "that I am right in accusing you; you must admit that you are changeable, capricious, a coquette, perhaps."

"Oh, no, Sire, I assure you! No, I say again; no, no!"

"Promise me, then, that for me you will always be the same."

"Oh, always, Sire!"

"That you will never show any of that severity which would break my heart, none of the sudden changes which would be worse than death to me."

"Oh, no, no!"

"Very well, then! but listen. I like promises; I like

to place under the guaranty of an oath, under the protection of Heaven in fact, everything which interests my heart and my affections. Promise me, or rather swear to me, that if in the life we are about to begin, — a life which will be full of sacrifice, mystery, anxiety, disappointment, and misunderstanding, — swear to me that if we should be deceiving or should misunderstand each other, or should be judging each other unjustly, for that indeed would be criminal in love such as ours, — swear to me, Louise — "

La Vallière trembled with agitation to the very depths of her heart; it was the first time she had heard her name pronounced in that manner by her royal lover. As for the king, taking off his glove and reaching his ungloved hand within the carriage, he continued: "Swear that never in all our quarrels will we allow one night even to pass by, if any misunderstanding should arise between us, without a visit, or at least a message, from either, in order to convey consolation and repose to the other."

La Vallière took her lover's burning hand between her own icy palms, and pressed it softly, until a movement of the horse, frightened by the proximity of the wheels, obliged her to abandon her happiness. She had sworn.

"Return, Sire," she said, "return to the queens; I foresee a storm rising yonder, which threatens my peace of mind."

Louis obeyed, saluted Mademoiselle de Montalais, and set off at a gallop to rejoin the queens' carriage. As he passed Monsieur's carriage, he observed that he was fast asleep, although Madame, on her part, was wide awake. As the king passed her, she said, "What a beautiful horse, Sire! Is it not Monsieur's bay horse?"

As for the young queen she merely remarked, "Are you better now, Sire?"

CHAPTER XXX.

TRIUMFEMINATE.

On the king's arrival in Paris, he sat at the council which had been summoned, and worked for a certain portion of the day. The queen remained at home with the queen-mother, and burst into tears as soon as she had taken leave of the king. "Ah, Madame!" she said, "the king no longer loves me! What will become of me?"

"A husband always loves his wife when she is like you," replied Anne of Austria.

"A time may come when he will love another woman instead of me."

"What do you call loving?"

"Oh! always thinking of a person, always seeking her society."

"Do you happen to have remarked," said Anne of Austria, "that the king has ever done anything of the sort?"

"No, Madame," said the young queen, hesitatingly.

"What is there to complain of, then, Marie?"

"And yet, my mother, admit that the king leaves me."

"The king, my daughter, belongs to his people."

"And that is the very reason why he no longer belongs to me; and that is the reason, too, why I shall find myself, as so many queens have been before me, forsaken and forgotten, while love, glory, and honors will be reserved for others. Oh, my mother, the king is so handsome! How often will others tell him that they love him, and how much, indeed, they must do so!"

"It is very seldom that women love the man in loving the king. But should that happen, — which I doubt, — you should rather wish, Marie, that such women should really love your husband. In the first place, the devoted love of a mistress is an element in the rapid dissolution of a lover's affection; and in the second place, by dint of loving, the mistress loses all influence over her lover, whose power or wealth she does not covet, caring only for his affection. Wish, therefore, that the king should love but lightly, and that his mistress should love with all her heart."

"Oh, my mother, what power may not a deep affection exercise over him!"

"And yet you say you are abandoned?"

"Quite true, quite true; I speak absurdly. There is a feeling of anguish, however, which I can never control."

"And that is —"

"The king may make a happy choice, — may find a home, not far from that we can offer him, — a home with children around him, the children of another woman than myself. Oh, I should die if I were ever to see the king's children!"

"Marie, Marie!" replied the queen-mother, with a smile, as she took the young queen's hand in her own, "remember what I am going to say, and let it always be a consolation to you, — the king cannot have a Dauphin without you, and you may have one without him."

With this remark, which she accompanied with an expressive burst of laughter, the queen-mother left her daughter-in-law in order to go to meet Madame, whose arrival in the grand boudoir had just been announced by one of the pages.

Madame had scarcely taken time to change her dress.

Her face revealed her agitation, which betrayed a plan the execution of which occupied her mind, while the probable results disturbed her. "I came to ascertain," she said, "whether your Majesties are suffering any fatigue from our journey."

"None at all," said the queen-mother.

"Very slight," replied Maria Theresa.

"I have suffered from annoyance more than from anything else," said Madame.

"What annoyance?" inquired Anne of Austria.

"The fatigue which the king undergoes in riding on horseback."

"That does the king good."

"And it was I who advised him to do it," said Maria Theresa, turning pale.

Madame said not a word in reply; but one of those smiles which were peculiarly her own flitted for a moment across her lips, without passing over the rest of her face; then, immediately changing the subject of conversation, she continued: "We shall find Paris precisely like the Paris we left, — the same intrigues, plots, and flirtations going on."

"Intrigues! To what intrigues do you allude?" inquired the queen-mother.

"People are talking a good deal about M. Fouquet and Madame de Plessis-Bellière."

"Who makes up the number to about ten thousand," replied the queen-mother. "But what are the plots, if you please?"

"We have, it seems, certain misunderstandings with Holland."

"What about?"

"Monsieur has been telling me the story of the medals."

"Oh!" exclaimed the young queen, "you mean those

medals which were struck in Holland, on which a cloud is seen passing across the sun, which is the king's device. You are wrong in calling that a plot, — it is an insult."

"But so contemptible that the king can well despise it," replied the queen-mother. "Well, what are the flirtations to which you alluded? Do you mean that of Madame d'Olonne?"

"No, no; nearer ourselves than that."

"*Casa de usted*," murmured the queen-mother, and without moving her lips, in Maria Theresa's ear.

She was not overheard by Madame, who thus continued: "You know the terrible news?"

"Oh, yes; M. de Guiche's wound."

"And do you attribute it, as every one else does, to an accident which happened to him while hunting?"

"Why, yes," said both the queens together, their interest awakened.

Madame drew closer to them, as she said, in a low tone, "It was a duel."

"Ah!" said Anne of Austria, in a severe tone; for in her ears the word "duel," which had been forbidden in France since she had reigned over it, had a wicked sound.

"A most deplorable duel, which has nearly cost Monsieur two of his best friends, and the king two of his best servants."

"What was the cause of the duel?" inquired the young queen, animated by a secret instinct.

"Flirtations," repeated Madame, triumphantly. "These gentlemen were conversing about the virtue of a lady. One of them thought that Pallas was a very second-rate person compared to her; the other pretended that the lady in question was an imitation of Venus alluring Mars; and upon my word the two gentlemen fought like Hector and Achilles."

"Venus alluring Mars?" said the young queen, in a low tone, without venturing to examine into the allegory very deeply.

"Who is the lady?" inquired Anne of Austria, abruptly. "You said, I believe, that she was one of the ladies of honor?"

"Did I say so?" replied Madame.

"Yes; I even thought that I heard you give her name."

"Are you not aware that such a woman is of ill omen to a royal house?"

"Is it Mademoiselle de la Vallière?" said the queen-mother.

"Yes, indeed, it is that ugly little creature."

"I thought that she was affianced to a gentleman who certainly is not — at least, I suppose so — either M. de Guiche or M. de Wardes."

"Very possibly, Madame."

The young queen took up a piece of tapestry, and began to unravel it with an affectation of tranquillity which her trembling fingers contradicted.

"What were you saying about Venus and Mars?" pursued the queen-mother. "Is there a Mars also?"

"She boasts of that being the case."

"Did you say she boasts of it?"

"That was the cause of the duel."

"And M. de Guiche upheld the cause of Mars?"

"Yes, certainly, like the devoted servant he is."

"The devoted servant of whom?" exclaimed the young queen, forgetting all her reserve in allowing her jealousy to escape her; "the servant of whom?"

"Mars not being able to be defended except at the expense of this Venus," replied Madame, "M. de Guiche maintained the perfect innocence of Mars, and no doubt affirmed that it was a mere boast of Venus."

"And M. de Wardes," said Anne of Austria, quietly, "spread the report that Venus was right, I suppose?"

"Ah! De Wardes," thought Madame, "you shall pay most dearly for the wound you have given that noblest of men!" And she began to attack De Wardes with the greatest bitterness; thus discharging the debt of the wounded man and her own, with the assurance that she was working the future ruin of her enemy. She said so much, in fact, that had Manicamp been there he would have regretted that he had shown such strong regard for his friend, inasmuch as it resulted in the ruin of his unfortunate foe.

"I see in the whole affair but one cause of mischief, and that is La Vallière herself," said the queen-mother.

The young queen resumed her work with a perfect indifference of manner, while Madame listened eagerly.

"Is not that your opinion?" said Anne of Austria to her. "Do you not lay to her the cause of this quarrel and encounter?"

Madame replied by a gesture which was no more a sign of affirmation than of dissent.

"I do not yet quite understand what you said just now about the danger of coquetry," resumed Anne of Austria.

"It is quite true," Madame hastened to say, "that if the girl had not been a coquette, Mars would not have thought at all about her."

The repetition of this word "Mars" brought a passing color to the young queen's cheeks; but she still continued her work.

"I will not permit that in my court gentlemen should be set against one another in this manner," said Anne of Austria, calmly. "Such manners were useful enough, perhaps, in a time when the divided nobility had no other rallying-point than mere gallantry. At that time women,

whose sway was absolute and undivided, were privileged to encourage men's valor by frequent trials of their courage; but now, thank Heaven, there is but one master in France, and to him every thought of the mind and every pulse of the body are due. I will not allow my son to be deprived of any one of his servants;" and she turned towards the young queen, saying, "What is to be done with this La Vallière?"

"La Vallière?" said the queen, apparently surprised; "I do not even know the name;" and she accompanied this answer with one of those frigid smiles which are observed only on royal lips.

Madame was herself a princess great in every respect, — great in intelligence, great by birth and pride. The queen's reply, however, completely astonished her, and she was obliged to pause for a moment in order to recover herself. "She is one of my maids of honor," she replied, with a bow.

"In that case," retorted Maria Theresa, in the same tone, "it is your affair, my sister, and not ours."

"I beg your pardon," resumed Anne of Austria, "it is my affair; and I perfectly well understand," she pursued, addressing a look full of intelligence at Madame, "Madame's motive for saying what she has just said."

"Everything which emanates from you, Madame," said the English princess, "proceeds from the lips of Wisdom."

"If we send this girl back again to her own family," said Maria Theresa, gently, "we must bestow a pension upon her."

"Which I will provide for out of my income," exclaimed Madame, quickly.

"No, no, Madame," interrupted Anne of Austria; "no disturbance, I beg. The king does not like to have any woman spoken of with disrespect. Let everything be

done quietly, if you please. Will you have the kindness, Madame, to send for this girl here? You, my daughter, will have the goodness to retire to your own room."

The old queen's requests were commands; and as Maria Theresa rose to return to her own apartments, Madame rose in order to send a page to summon La Vallière.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE FIRST QUARREL.

La Vallière entered the queen-mother's apartments without in the least suspecting that a serious plot was being concerted against her. She thought it was for something connected with her duties, and never had the queen-mother been unkind to her when such was the case. Besides, not being immediately under the control of Anne of Austria, she could have only an official connection with her, to which her own gentleness of disposition and the rank of the august princess made her yield on every occasion with the best possible grace. She therefore advanced towards the queen-mother with that soft and gentle smile which constituted her principal charm; and as she did not approach sufficiently close, Anne of Austria signed to her to come nearer. Madame then entered the room, and with a perfectly calm air took her seat beside her mother-in-law and continued the work which Maria Theresa had begun. When La Vallière, instead of the directions which she expected immediately to receive, perceived these preparations, she looked with curiosity, if not with uneasiness, at the two princesses. Anne seemed deliberating, while Madame maintained an affectation of indifference which would have alarmed a less timid person even than Louise.

"Mademoiselle," said the queen-mother suddenly, without attempting to moderate or disguise her Spanish accent, which she never failed to do except when she was angry, "come closer; we were talking of you, as every one else seems to be doing."

"Of me!" exclaimed La Vallière, turning pale.

"Pretend to be ignorant of it; that is right. Do you know of the duel between M. de Guiche and M. de Wardes?"

"Oh, Madame! I heard a rumor of it yesterday," said La Vallière, clasping her hands.

"And did you not foresee this quarrel?"

"Why should I, Madame?"

"Because two men never fight without a motive, and because you must be aware of the motive which awakened the animosity of the two adversaries."

"I am perfectly ignorant of it, Madame."

"A persevering denial is a very commonplace mode of defence; and you, who have great pretensions to be witty and clever, Mademoiselle, ought to avoid commonplaces. What else have you to say?"

"Oh, Madame, your Majesty terrifies me with your cold severity! Have I been so unfortunate as to incur your displeasure?"

Madame began to laugh, and La Vallière looked at her with an amazed air.

Anne resumed: "My displeasure! — incur my displeasure! You do not reflect, Mademoiselle de la Vallière, that it is necessary for me to notice people in order to visit them with my displeasure. I notice you only because people are talking about you a little too much, and I do not like to have them talk about the young ladies of my court."

"Your Majesty does me great honor," replied La Vallière, alarmed; "but I do not understand why people should occupy themselves with me."

"Then I will tell you. M. de Guiche has been obliged to undertake your defence."

"My defence?"

"Yes. He is a gallant knight, and beautiful adventuresses like to see brave knights couch their lances in their honor. But for my part I hate fields of battle; and more than all, do I hate adventures, and — Make your own application!"

La Vallière sank at the queen's feet, who turned her back upon her. She stretched out her hands towards Madame, who laughed in her face. A feeling of pride made her rise to her feet.

"I have begged your Majesty to tell me what is the crime I am accused of, — I can claim this at your Majesty's hands; and I observe that I am condemned before I am even permitted to justify myself."

"Eh! indeed," cried Anne of Austria, "listen to her fine phrases, Madame, and to her fine sentiments; she is an inexhaustible well of tenderness and of heroic expressions. One can easily see, young lady, that we have cultivated our mind in the society of crowned heads."

La Vallière felt struck to the heart; she became, not paler, but as white as a lily, and all her strength forsook her.

"I wished to inform you," interrupted the queen, disdainfully, "that if you continue to nourish such feelings, you will humiliate the rest of us to such a degree that we shall be ashamed to appear before you. Become simple in your manners, Mademoiselle! By the by, I am informed that you are affianced; is it the case?"

La Vallière pressed her hand over her heart, which was wrung with a fresh pang.

"Answer when you are spoken to!"

"Yes, Madame."

"To a gentleman?"

"Yes, Madame."

"His name?"

"M. le Vicomte de Bragelonne."

"Are you aware that it is an exceedingly fortunate circumstance for you, Mademoiselle, that such is the case? And without fortune or position, as you are, or without any very great personal advantages, you ought to bless Heaven for having procured you such a future as seems to be in store for you."

La Vallière did not reply.

"Where is this Vicomte de Bragelonne?" pursued the queen.

"In England," said Madame, "where the report of this young lady's success will not fail to reach him."

"Oh, Heaven!" murmured La Vallière, in despair.

"Very well, Mademoiselle," said Anne of Austria, "we will get this young gentleman to return, and send you away somewhere with him. If you are of a different opinion, — for girls have strange views and fancies at times, — trust to me, I will put you in the proper path again. I have done as much for girls who are not so good as you are, perhaps."

La Vallière ceased to hear the queen, who pitilessly added: "I will send you somewhere by yourself, where you may reflect seriously. Reflection calms the ardor of the blood, and swallows up all the illusions of youth. I suppose you have understood me?"

"Madame, Madame!"

"Not a word!"

"Madame, I am innocent of everything your Majesty can suppose. Oh, Madame! you are a witness of my despair. I love, I respect, your Majesty so much!"

"It would be far better not to respect me at all," said the queen, with chilling irony. "It would be far better if you were not innocent. Do you presume to suppose that I should be satisfied simply to leave you unpunished if you had committed the fault?"

"Oh, Madame, you are killing me!"

"No acting, if you please, or I will undertake the *dénouement* of the comedy. Leave the room; return to your own apartment, and I trust my lesson may be of service to you."

"Madame!" said La Vallière to the Duchesse d'Orléans, whose hands she seized in her own, "do you, who are so good, intercede for me!"

"I!" replied the latter, with an insulting joy, "I — good! Ah, Mademoiselle, I shall do nothing of the kind!" and with a rude, hasty gesture, she repulsed the young girl's hand.

La Vallière, instead of giving way, as from her extreme pallor and from her tears the two princesses might possibly have expected, suddenly resumed her calm and dignified air; she bowed profoundly, and left the room.

"Well!" said Anne of Austria to Madame, "do you think that she will begin again?"

"I always suspect those gentle and patient characters," replied Madame. "Nothing is more full of courage than a patient heart; nothing is more self-reliant than a gentle spirit."

"I assure you that she will think twice before she looks at the god Mars again."

"Unless she secures the protection of his buckler," retorted Madame.

A proud, defiant look of the queen-mother was the reply to this objection, which was by no means deficient in shrewdness; and both of them, almost sure of their victory, went to look for Maria Theresa, who was awaiting them and trying to disguise her impatience.

It was then about half-past six in the evening, and the king had just partaken of some refreshment. He lost no time; but no sooner was the repast finished, and business

matters settled, than he took De Saint-Aignan by the arm, and desired him to lead him to La Vallière's apartments. The courtier uttered a loud exclamation.

"Well, what is that for?" replied the king. "It is a habit you will have to adopt; and in order to adopt a habit, you have to make a beginning."

"But, Sire, the young ladies' apartments here are as open as daylight; every one can see those who enter or leave them. If, however, some pretext or other were made use of, — if your Majesty, for instance, would wait until Madame were in her own apartments — "

"No pretexts, no delays. I have had enough of these disappointments and these mysteries; I cannot perceive in what respect the King of France dishonors himself in conversing with a clever girl. Evil be to him who evil thinks!"

"Will your Majesty forgive an excess of zeal on my part?"

"Speak freely."

"And the queen?"

"True, true; I always wish the greatest respect to be shown to her Majesty. Well, then, this evening only will I pay Mademoiselle de la Vallière a visit, and after to-day I will make use of all the pretexts you like. To-morrow we seek them; to-night I have not the time."

De Saint-Aignan did not reply; he descended the steps, preceding the king, and crossed the different courtyards with a feeling of shame, which the distinguished honor of supporting the king did not remove. For De Saint-Aignan wished to stand well with Madame as well as with the two queens, and he did not, on the other hand, wish to displease Mademoiselle de la Vallière; and in order to carry out so many promising affairs, it was difficult to avoid jostling against some obstacle or other.

Besides, the windows of the young queen's rooms, those of the queen-mother's, and of Madame's looked out upon the courtyard of the maids of honor. To be seen conducting the king, therefore, would be effectually to quarrel with three great princesses — with three women whose authority was unbounded — for the slight inducement of gaining ephemeral credit with a mistress. The unhappy De Saint-Aignan, who had displayed so much courage in taking La Vallière's part in the park of Fontainebleau, did not feel himself so brave in the broad daylight, and found a thousand defects in the poor girl which he was most eager to communicate to the king. But his trial was soon over, — the courtyards were crossed; not a curtain was drawn aside, nor a window opened. The king walked quickly because of his impatience, and also because of the long legs of De Saint-Aignan, who preceded him. At the door De Saint-Aignan wished to retire, but the king desired him to remain; this was a delicate consideration on the king's part, which the courtier could very well have dispensed with. He had to follow Louis into La Vallière's apartment. As soon as the king arrived, the young girl dried her tears, but did it so hurriedly that the king perceived it. He questioned her most anxiously and tenderly, and pressed her to tell him the cause of her emotion.

"I have nothing the matter with me, Sire," she said.

"And yet you were weeping."

"Oh, no, indeed, Sire."

"Look, De Saint-Aignan! am I mistaken?"

De Saint-Aignan ought to have answered, but he was greatly embarrassed.

"At all events, your eyes are red, Mademoiselle," said the king.

"The dust of the road merely, Sire."

"No, no; you no longer possess that air of supreme contentment which renders you so beautiful and so attractive. You do not look at me. Why avoid my gaze?" he said, as she turned aside her head. "In Heaven's name, what is the matter?" he inquired, beginning to lose all command over himself.

"Nothing at all, Sire, I repeat; and I am perfectly ready to assure your Majesty that my mind is as free from anxiety as you could possibly wish."

"Your mind at ease, when I see that you are embarrassed in your every look and gesture! Has any one wounded or annoyed you?"

"No, no, Sire."

"I insist upon knowing if such really be the case," said the young prince, his eyes flashing.

"No one, Sire; no one has offended me."

"In that case do resume your gentle air of gayety, or that sweet melancholy look which I so loved in you this morning; for pity's sake, do so!"

"Yes, Sire, yes."

The king struck the floor impatiently with his foot, saying, "Such a change is positively inexplicable;" and he looked at De Saint-Aignan, who had also remarked La Vallière's heavy languor of manner as well as the king's impatience.

It was utterly useless for the king to entreat, and as useless for him to try his utmost to overcome that deadly sorrow; the poor girl was completely prostrated, — the aspect of death itself could not have awakened her from her torpor. The king saw, in her repeated negative replies, a mystery full of unkindness; he began to look all around him with a suspicious air.

There happened to be in La Vallière's room a miniature portrait of Athos. The king remarked this portrait, which

bore a considerable resemblance to Bragelonne, for it had been taken when the count was quite a young man. He regarded this picture with a threatening air. La Vallière, in her depressed state of mind, and very far indeed from thinking of this portrait, could not interpret the king's preoccupation. And yet the king's mind was occupied with a terrible remembrance, which had more than once taken possession of him, but which he had always driven away. He recalled the intimacy which had existed between the two young persons from their birth, the engagement which had followed, and the fact that Athos had himself come to solicit La Vallière's hand for Raoul. He imagined that on her return to Paris La Vallière had found certain news from London awaiting her, and that this news had counterbalanced the influence which he had been enabled to exert over her. He immediately felt himself stung, as it were, by feelings of the wildest jealousy; and he again questioned her, with increased bitterness.

La Vallière could not reply, unless she were to acknowledge everything, which would be to accuse the queen, and Madame also; and the consequence would be that she would have to enter upon an open warfare with these two great and powerful princesses. She thought within herself that as she made no attempt to conceal from the king what was passing in her own mind, the king ought to be able to read her heart, in spite of her silence; and that if he really loved her, he would have understood, and guessed everything. What was sympathy, then, if it were not that divine flame which should enlighten the heart, and save true lovers the necessity of words? She maintained her silence, therefore, satisfying herself with sighing, weeping, and concealing her face in her hands.

These sighs and tears, which had at first distressed and

then alarmed Louis XIV., now irritated him. He could not bear any opposition, — not the opposition which tears and sighs exhibited, any more than opposition of any other kind. His remarks, therefore, became bitter, urgent, and aggressive. This was a fresh cause of distress for the poor girl. From that very circumstance which she regarded as an injustice on her lover's part, she drew sufficient courage to bear, not only her other troubles, but even this one also.

The king next began to accuse her in direct terms La Vallière did not even attempt to defend herself, she endured all his accusations without according any other reply than that of shaking her head, without making any other remark than that which escapes every heart in deep distress, by a prayerful appeal to Heaven for help. But this ejaculation, instead of calming the king's displeasure, rather increased it; it was an appeal to a higher power than his own, to a being who could protect La Vallière against himself. He, moreover, saw himself seconded by De Saint-Aignan; for De Saint-Aignan, as we have observed, having seen the storm increasing, and not knowing the extent of the regard of which Louis XIV. was capable, felt by anticipation all the collected wrath of the three princesses, and the near approach of poor La Vallière's downfall, and he was not true knight enough to resist the fear that he himself might possibly be dragged down in the impending ruin. De Saint-Aignan did not reply to the king's questions except by short remarks, pronounced half aloud; and by abrupt gestures, whose object was to make things worse, and bring about a misunderstanding, the result of which would be to free him from the annoyance of having to cross the courtyards in broad open day, in order to follow his illustrious companion to La Vallière's apartments.

In the mean time the king's anger momentarily increased; he made two or three steps towards the door, as if to leave the room, but then returned; the young girl had not raised her head, although the sound of his footsteps might have warned her that her lover was leaving her. He drew himself up for a moment before her, with his arms crossed. "For the last time, Mademoiselle," he said, "will you speak? Will you assign a reason for this change, for this fickleness, for this caprice?"

"What can I say?" murmured La Vallière. "Do you not see, Sire, that I am completely overwhelmed at this moment, — that I have no power of will or thought or speech?"

"Is it so difficult, then, to speak the truth? You would have told me the truth in fewer words than those you have just uttered."

"But the truth about what, Sire?"

"About everything"

La Vallière was just on the point of revealing the whole truth to the king; her arms made a sudden movement as if they were about to open, but her lips remained silent, and her arms resumed their former position. The poor girl had not yet endured sufficient unhappiness to risk the necessary revelation. "I know nothing," she stammered out.

"Oh!" exclaimed the king, "this is more than mere coquetry or caprice; it is treason." And this time nothing could restrain him; the impulses of his heart were not sufficient to induce him to turn back, and he darted out of the room with a gesture of despair. De Saint-Aignan followed him, wishing for nothing better than to leave the place.

Louis XIV. did not pause until he reached the staircase, and grasping the balustrade said, "You see how shamefully I have been duped."

"How, Sire?" inquired the favorite.

"De Guiche fought on the Vicomte de Bragelonne's account, and this Bragelonne — oh, she still loves him! I vow to you, De Saint-Aignan, that if three days hence there should remain but an atom of affection for her in my heart, I should die from very shame;" and the king resumed his way to his own apartments.

"I assured your Majesty how it would be," murmured De Saint-Aignan, continuing to follow the king, and timidly glancing up at all the windows. Unfortunately their return was not unobserved, as their arrival had been.

A curtain was hurriedly drawn aside; Madame was behind it. She had seen the king leave the apartments of the maids of honor; and as soon as his Majesty had passed, she rose, left her own apartments hurriedly, and ran up the staircase, two steps at a time, which led to the room the king had just left.

CHAPTER XXXII.

DESPAIR.

After the departure of the king, La Vallière raised herself from the ground, and extended her arms, as if to follow and detain him; but when he had violently closed the door, and the sound of his retreating footsteps was lost in the distance, she had hardly sufficient strength left to totter towards and fall at the foot of her crucifix. There she remained, broken-hearted, crushed, and overwhelmed by despair, forgetful of and indifferent to everything but her grief itself, — a grief, moreover, which she could not comprehend except by instinct and sensation. In the midst of the wild tumult of her thoughts, La Vallière heard her door open again; she started, and turned round, thinking that it was the king who had returned. She was mistaken; it was Madame. What did she now care for Madame! Again she sank down, her head resting upon her devotional chair. It was Madame, excited, irritated, and threatening. But what was that to her?

"Mademoiselle," said the princess, standing before La Vallière, "this is very fine, I admit, — to kneel, and pray, and make a pretence of being religious; but however submissive you may be before the King of heaven, it is desirable that you should pay some little attention to the will of the princes of the earth."

La Vallière raised her head painfully in token of respect.

"Not long since," continued Madame, "a certain recommendation was addressed to you, I believe."

La Vallière's fixed and wild gaze showed her unconsciousness and her forgetfulness.

"The queen recommended you," continued Madame, "to conduct yourself in such a manner that no one could be justified in spreading any reports about you."

La Vallière's look became an inquiring one.

"Well," continued Madame, "there has just gone out of your rooms some one whose presence here is an accusation against you."

La Vallière remained silent.

"I will not," continued Madame, "allow my household, which is that of the first princess of the blood, to set an evil example to the court; you would be the cause of such an example. I beg you to understand, therefore, Mademoiselle, in the absence of any witness, — for I do not wish to humiliate you, — that you are from this moment at perfect liberty to leave, and that you may return to your mother at Blois."

La Vallière could not sink lower, nor could she suffer more than she had already suffered. Her countenance did not even change, but she remained with her hands crossed over her knees like the figure of the Magdalen.

"Did you hear me?" said Madame.

A shiver, which passed through her whole frame, was La Vallière's only reply; and as the victim gave no other sign of life, Madame left the room. And then, the very action of her heart suspended, and her blood almost congealed as it were in her veins, La Vallière by degrees felt that the pulsations in her wrists, her neck, and temples became more and more rapid. These pulsations, as they gradually increased, soon changed into a species of brain fever, and in her temporary delirium she saw the figures of her friends contending with her enemies, floating before her vision. She heard, too, mingled together in

her deafened ears, words of menace and words of fond affection; she no longer had any consciousness of self-identity; she seemed raised out of her former existence as though upon the wings of a mighty tempest, and in the dim horizon of the path along which her delirium hurried her, she saw the stone which covered her tomb upraised, and the dark and appalling interior of eternal night revealed to her. But the horror of the dream which had possessed her senses soon faded away, and she was again restored to her habitual resignation. A ray of hope penetrated her heart, as a ray of sunlight streams into the dungeon of some unhappy prisoner. Her mind reverted to the journey from Fontainebleau; she saw the king at the door of her carriage, telling her that he loved her, asking for her love in return, requiring her to swear, and himself swearing too, that never should an evening pass by, if ever a misunderstanding were to arise between them, without a visit, a letter, a sign of some kind, being sent, to replace the troubled anxiety of the evening by the calm repose of the night. It was the king who had suggested that, who had imposed a promise upon her, who had himself sworn it also. It was impossible, therefore, she reasoned, that the king should fail to keep the promise which he had himself exacted, unless, indeed, the king were a despot who enforced love as he enforced obedience; unless, too, the king were so indifferent that the first obstacle in his way were sufficient to arrest his further progress. The king, that kind protector, who by a word, by a single word, could relieve her distress of mind, — the king even joined her persecutors. Oh, his anger could not possibly last! Now that he was alone, he would be suffering all that she herself was a prey to. But he was not tied hand and foot as she was: he could act, could move about, could come to her; while she, she — could do nothing but

wait. And the poor girl waited and waited with breathless anxiety, for she could not believe it possible that the king would not come.

It was now nearly half-past ten. He would either come to her, or write to her, or send some kind word by M. de Saint-Aignan. If he were to come, oh! how she would fly to meet him; how she would thrust aside that excess of delicacy which she now discovered was misunderstood; how eagerly she would explain: "It is not I who do not love you; it is the fault of others who will not allow me to love you!" And then it must be confessed that as she reflected upon it, and precisely in proportion as she reflected, Louis appeared to her to be less blameworthy. In fact, he was ignorant of everything. What must he have thought of the obstinacy with which she had remained silent? Impatient and irritable as the king was known to be, it was extraordinary that he had been able to preserve his temper so long. Oh, she certainly would not have acted in such a manner; she would have understood everything, have guessed everything! Yes; but she was a poor girl, and not a great king. Oh, if he did but come, if he would but come, how eagerly she would forgive him for all he had just made her suffer! how much more tenderly she would love him because she had so suffered! And so she sat, with her head bent forward in eager expectation towards the door, her lips slightly parted, awaiting — and Heaven forgive her for the thought! — the kiss which the king's lips had in the morning so sweetly indicated when he pronounced the word *amour!* If the king did not come, at least he would write; it was a second chance, — a chance less delightful, less happy than the other, but which would show an affection just as strong, if more timorous in its nature. Oh, how she would devour his letter, how she would hasten to answer it! and when

the messenger who had brought it had left her, how she would kiss, read over and over again, press upon her heart the happy paper which would have brought her ease of mind, tranquillity, and perfect happiness! At all events, the king was not coming; if the king did not write, he could not do otherwise than send De Saint-Aignan, or De Saint-Aignan could not do otherwise than come of his own accord. Even if it were a third person, how openly she would speak to him, — the royal presence would not be there to freeze her words upon her tongue, — and then no suspicious feeling would remain a moment longer in the king's heart.

Everything with La Vallière — heart and look, body and mind — was concentrated in eager expectation. She said to herself that there still remained an hour of hope; that until midnight had struck, the king might come or write or send; that at midnight only would every expectation be useless, every hope disappointed. Whenever there was any noise in the palace, the poor girl fancied she was the occasion of it; whenever she heard any one pass in the courtyard below, she imagined that they were messengers of the king coming to her. Eleven o'clock struck; then a quarter-past eleven; then half-past. The minutes dragged slowly on in this anxiety, and yet they seemed to pass far too quickly. And now it struck a quarter to twelve. Midnight, midnight, — the last, the final hope, — came in its turn. With the last stroke of the clock the last light was extinguished; with the last light, the last hope. And so the king himself had deceived her; he had been the first to prove false to the oath which he had sworn that very day. Twelve hours only between his oath and his perjury; it was not long, certainly, to have preserved the illusion. And so not only did the king not love her, but still more, he despised her, whom every one

overwhelmed, — he despised her to the extent even of abandoning her to the shame of an expulsion which was equivalent to having an ignominious sentence passed upon her; and yet it was he, the king himself, who was the first cause of this ignominy.

A bitter smile, the only symptom of anger which during this long conflict had passed across the victim's angelic face, appeared upon her lips. What, in fact, now remained on earth for her, after the king was lost to her? Nothing. But God remained in heaven. She thought of God. "My God!" she said, "show me thyself what course I ought to take. It is from thee that I receive everything, and on thee I ought still to depend;" and she looked at her crucifix with humble and loving devotion. "There," she said, "is a Master who never forgets and never abandons those who do not abandon and who do not forget him; it is to him alone that we must sacrifice ourselves;" and thereupon, could any one have gazed into the recesses of that chamber, he would have seen the poor despairing girl adopt a final resolution, determine upon one last plan in her mind, and mount indeed that lofty Jacob's ladder which leads souls from earth to heaven. Then, as her knees were no longer able to support her, she gradually sank down upon the *prie-dieu*, and with her head pressed against the wooden cross, her eyes fixed, and her respiration short and quick, she watched for the earliest rays of approaching daylight.

At two o'clock in the morning she was still in the same bewilderment of mind, or rather in the same ecstasy of feeling. Her thoughts had almost ceased to hold any communion with the things of this world. And when she saw the violet tints of early dawn descend upon the roofs of the palace and vaguely reveal the outlines of the ivory crucifix which she embraced, she rose from the

ground with a new-born strength, kissed the feet of the divine martyr, and descended the staircase leading from the room, wrapping herself from head to foot in a mantle as she went along. She reached the wicket at the very moment when the guard of Musketeers opened the gate to admit the first relief-guard belonging to one of the Swiss regiments; and then, gliding behind the soldiers, she reached the street before the officer in command of the patrol had even thought of asking who the young girl was who was making her escape from the palace at so early an hour.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE FLIGHT.

La Vallière followed the patrol as it left the courtyard. The patrol bent its steps towards the right, by the Rue St. Honoré, and mechanically La Vallière went to the left. Her resolution was taken, her determination fixed; she wished to betake herself to the convent of the Carmelites at Chaillot, the superior of which enjoyed a reputation for severity which would make the worldly-minded people of the court tremble. La Vallière had never seen Paris. She had never gone out on foot, and so would have been unable to find her way, even had she been in a calmer frame of mind; and this may explain why she ascended, instead of descended, the Rue St. Honoré. Her only thought was to get away from the Palais-Royal, and this she was doing. She had heard it said that Chaillot looked out upon the Seine, and she accordingly directed her steps towards the Seine. She took the Rue du Coq, and not being able to cross the Louvre bore towards the church of St. Germain-l'Auxerrois, proceeding along the site of the colonnade which was subsequently built there by Perrault.

In a very short time she reached the quays. Her steps were rapid and agitated; she scarcely felt the weakness which now and then reminded her of having sprained her foot when very young, and which obliged her to limp slightly. At any other hour in the day her countenance would have awakened the suspicions of the least clear-

sighted persons, or have attracted the attention of the most indifferent passers-by. But at half-past two in the morning the streets of Paris are almost, if not quite, deserted, and scarcely any one is to be seen but the hard-working artisan on his way to earn his daily bread, or the dangerous idlers of the streets, who are returning to their homes after a night of riot and debauchery; for the former the day was beginning, for the latter it was just closing. La Vallière was afraid of all those faces, in which her ignorance of Parisian types did not permit her to distinguish the type of probity from that of dishonesty. The appearance of misery alarmed her, and all whom she met seemed wretched and miserable. Her toilet, which was the same she had worn during the previous evening, was elegant even in its careless disorder, for it was the one in which she had presented herself to the queen-mother; and, moreover, when she drew aside the mantle which covered her face, in order to enable her to see the way she was going, her pallor and her beautiful eyes spoke an unknown language to the men she met, and without knowing it, the poor fugitive awakened the brutality of some, the compassion of others.

La Vallière still walked on in the same way, breathless and hurried, until she reached the top of the Place de Grève. She stopped from time to time, placed her hand upon her heart, leaned against a wall until she could breathe freely again, and then continued her course more rapidly than before. On reaching the Place de Grève, La Vallière suddenly came upon a group of three drunken men, dishevelled and reeling and staggering along, who were just leaving a boat, which they had made fast to the quay; the boat was freighted with wines, and it was apparent that they had done complete justice to the merchandise. They were singing their convivial exploits in three

different keys, when suddenly, as they reached the end of the railing leading down to the quay, they all at once found themselves obstructing the path of this young girl. La Vallière stopped; while they on their side, at the appearance of the young girl dressed in court costume, also halted, and with one accord, seizing each other by the hand, they surrounded La Vallière, singing, —

"Oh, you who sadly are wandering alone,
Come, come, and laugh with us!"

La Vallière at once understood that the men were addressing her, and wished to prevent her from passing, she made many efforts to escape, but they were useless. Her limbs failed her; she felt that she was on the point of falling, and uttered a cry of terror. But at the same moment the circle which surrounded her was suddenly broken through in a most violent manner. One of her insulters was knocked to the left, another fell rolling over and over to the right close to the water's edge, while the third could hardly keep his feet. An officer of the Musketeers stood face to face with the young girl, with frowning brow, a threat on his lips, and his hand raised to give the threat fulfilment. The drunken fellows, at the sight of the uniform, made their escape with all despatch, — and the greater for the proof of strength which the wearer of the uniform had just afforded them.

"*Mordioux!*" exclaimed the musketeer, "it is Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

La Vallière, bewildered by what had just happened and confounded by hearing her name pronounced, looked up and recognized D'Artagnan.

"Oh, Monsieur, it is indeed I!" and at the same time she seized hold of his arm. "You will protect me, M. d'Artagnan, will you not?" she added, in a tone of entreaty.

"Most certainly I will protect you; but in Heaven's name where are you going at this hour?"

"I am going to Chaillot."

"You are going to Chaillot by the way of La Rapée! Why, Mademoiselle, the truth is that you are turning your back to it."

"In that case, Monsieur, be kind enough to put me in the right way, and to go with me a short distance."

"Most willingly."

"But how does it happen that I find you here? By what merciful direction were you so near at hand to come to my assistance? I almost seem to be dreaming or to be losing my senses."

"I happened to be here, Mademoiselle, because I have a house in the Place de Grève, at the sign of the Notre Dame, the rent of which I went to collect yesterday, and where I in fact passed the night; and I also wished to be at the palace early, for the purpose of inspecting my posts."

"Thank you," said La Vallière.

"That is what *I* was doing," said D'Artagnan to himself; "but what was *she* doing, and why is she going to Chaillot at such an hour?" and he offered her his arm, which she took, and began to walk with increased speed, which concealed, however, great weakness. D'Artagnan perceived it, and proposed to La Vallière that she should rest; but she refused.

"You are ignorant, perhaps, where Chaillot is?" inquired D'Artagnan.

"Quite so."

"It is a great distance."

"That matters very little."

"It is at least a league."

"I can walk it."

D'Artagnan did not reply; he could tell, merely by the

tone of a voice, when a resolution was real or not. He rather bore along than accompanied La Vallière, until they perceived the elevated ground of Chaillot.

"To what house are you going, Mademoiselle?" inquired D'Artagnan.

"To the Carmelites, Monsieur."

"To the Carmelites?" repeated D'Artagnan, in no little amazement.

"Yes; and since Heaven has directed you to me to give me your support on my road, accept both my thanks and my adieux."

"To the Carmelites! Your adieux! Are you going to become a nun?" exclaimed D'Artagnan.

"Yes, Monsieur."

"What, you!!!"

There was in this "you," which we have marked by three notes of exclamation in order to render it as expressive as possible, — there was, we repeat, in this "you" a complete poem. It recalled to La Vallière her old recollections of Blois and her new recollections of Fontainebleau; it said to her, "*You*, who might be happy with Raoul, — *you*, who might be powerful with Louis, — *you* about to become a nun!"

"Yes, Monsieur," she said; "I am going to devote myself to the service of Heaven, and to renounce the world altogether."

"But are you not mistaken with regard to your vocation, — are you not mistaken in supposing it to be the will of Heaven?"

"No; since Heaven has permitted me to meet you. Had it not been for you, I should certainly have sunk from fatigue on the road; and since Heaven, I repeat, has thrown you in my way, it is because it has willed that I should carry out my intention."

"Oh!" said D'Artagnan, doubtingly, "that is a rather subtle argument, I think."

"Whatever it may be," returned the young girl, "I have acquainted you with the steps I have taken, and with my resolution. And now I have one last favor to ask of you, even while I return you my thanks. The king is entirely ignorant of my flight from the Palais-Royal, and is ignorant also of what I am about to do."

"The king ignorant, you say!" exclaimed D'Artagnan. "Take care, Mademoiselle; you do not consider the import of your action. No one ought to do anything with which the king is unacquainted, especially those who belong to the court."

"I no longer belong to the court, Monsieur."

D'Artagnan looked at the young girl with increasing astonishment.

"Do not be uneasy, Monsieur!" she continued. "I have well considered everything; and were it not so, it would now be too late to reconsider my resolution, — I have acted upon it."

"Well, Mademoiselle, what do you wish me to do?"

"In the name of that sympathy which misfortune inspires, by your generous feelings, and by your honor as a gentleman, I entreat you to swear to me one thing."

"Name it."

"Swear to me, M. d'Artagnan, that you will not tell the king that you have seen me, and that I am at the Carmelites."

"I will not swear that," said D'Artagnan, shaking his head.

"Why?"

"Because I know the king, I know you, I know myself even, — nay, the whole human race, — too well; no, no. I will not swear that!"

"In that case," cried La Vallière, with an energy of which one would hardly have thought her capable, "instead of the blessing which I should have implored for you until my dying day, I will invoke a curse, for you are rendering me the most miserable creature that ever lived."

We have already observed that D'Artagnan could easily recognize the accents of truth and sincerity, and he could not resist this last appeal. He saw by her face how bitterly she suffered from a feeling of degradation; he remarked her trembling limbs, how her whole slight and delicate frame was violently agitated by some internal struggle, and clearly perceived that resistance might be fatal. "I will do as you wish, then," he said. "Be satisfied, Mademoiselle; I will say nothing to the king."

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" exclaimed La Vallière; "you are the most generous of men." And in her extreme delight she seized hold of D'Artagnan's hands, and pressed them within her own.

D'Artagnan, who felt himself quite overcome, said: "This is touching, upon my word! Here is one who begins where others leave off."

And La Vallière, who in the extremity of her distress had sunk down and seated herself upon a stone, rose and walked towards the convent of the Carmelites, which could be seen looming up in the dawning light. D'Artagnan followed her at a distance. The door of the parlor was half open; she glided in like a shadow, and thanking D'Artagnan by a parting wave of the hand, disappeared from his sight.

When D'Artagnan found himself quite alone, he deliberated profoundly upon what had just taken place. "Upon my word," he said, "this looks very much like what is called a false position. To keep such a secret as that is to

keep a burning coal in one's pocket, and trust that it may not burn the stuff. And yet not to keep it when I have sworn to do so is dishonorable. It generally happens that some bright idea or other occurs to me as I am going along; but I am very much mistaken if I shall not now have to go a long way in order to find the solution of this affair. Yes, but which way to go? Oh! towards Paris, of course; that is the best way, after all. Only we must make haste; and in order to make haste, four legs are better than two, and I, unhappily, just now have only two. 'A horse, a horse!' as I heard them say at the theatre in London, — 'my kingdom for a horse!' And now I think of it, it need not cost me so much as that, for at the Barrière de la Conférence there is a guard of Musketeers; and instead of the one horse I need, I shall there find ten."

So, in pursuance of this resolution, which he had adopted with his usual rapidity, D'Artagnan immediately turned his back upon the heights of Chaillot, reached the guard-house, took the fastest horse he could find there, and was at the palace in ten minutes. It was striking five as he reached the Palais-Royal. The king, he was told, went to bed at his usual hour, after having been engaged with M. Colbert, and in all probability was still fast asleep. "Come," said D'Artagnan, "she spoke the truth, and the king is ignorant of everything; if he only knew one half of what has happened, the Palais-Royal by this time would be turned upside down."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

SHOWING HOW LOUIS, ON HIS SIDE, HAD PASSED THE TIME FROM TEN TO HALF-PAST TWELVE AT NIGHT.

When the king left the apartment of the maids of honor, he found Colbert awaiting him in his cabinet to receive directions with regard to the next day's ceremony, as the king was then to receive the Dutch and Spanish ambassadors. Louis XIV. had serious causes of dissatisfaction with the Dutch; the States had already been guilty of many mean shifts and evasions in their relations with France, and without perceiving or without caring about the chances of a rupture, had again abandoned the alliance with his Most Christian Majesty, for the purpose of entering into all kinds of plots with Spain.

Louis XIV. at his accession — that is to say, at the death of Mazarin — had found this political question roughly sketched out. The solution was difficult for a young man; but as at that time the king represented the whole nation, anything that he resolved upon, the nation would be found ready to carry out. Any sudden impulse of anger, the reaction of young and hot blood to the brain, would be quite sufficient to change an old form of policy and to create another and a new system altogether. The part that diplomatists had to play in those days was that of arranging among themselves the different *coups-d'état* which their sovereign masters might wish to effect.

Louis was not in that calm state of mind in which he could determine upon a wise course of policy. Still much

agitated from the quarrel he had just had with La Vallière, he walked hastily into his cabinet, exceedingly desirous of finding an opportunity of producing an explosion after he had controlled himself for so long a time. Colbert, as he saw the king enter, knew the position of affairs at a glance, understood the king's intentions, and resolved therefore to manœuvre a little. When Louis requested to be informed what it would be necessary to say on the morrow, Colbert began by expressing his surprise that his Majesty had not been properly informed by M. Fouquet. "M. Fouquet," he said, "is perfectly acquainted with the whole of this Dutch affair; he receives all the correspondence himself direct."

The king, who was accustomed to hear M. Colbert find fault with M. Fouquet, allowed this remark to pass by unanswered, and merely listened. Colbert noticed the effect he had produced, and hastened to back out, saying that M. Fouquet was not on all occasions as blamable as at the first glance might seem to be the case, inasmuch as at that moment he was greatly occupied.

The king looked up. "To what do you allude?" he said.

"Sire, men are but men, and M. Fouquet has his defects as well as his great qualities."

"Ah! defects, — who is without them, M. Colbert?"

"Your Majesty is not," said Colbert, boldly; for he knew how to convey a good deal of flattery in a light amount of blame, like the arrow which cleaves the air notwithstanding its weight, thanks to the light feathers which bear it up.

The king smiled. "What defect has M. Fouquet, then?" he said.

"Still the same, Sire; it is said that he is in love."

"In love! with whom?"

"I am not quite sure, Sire; I have very little to do with matters of gallantry."

"At all events, you know, since you speak of it."

"I have heard a name mentioned."

"Whose?"

"I cannot now remember whose, but I think it is one of Madame's maids of honor."

The king started. "You know more than you like to say, M. Colbert," he murmured.

"I assure you, no, Sire."

"At all events Madame's maids of honor are all known; and in mentioning their names to you, you will perhaps recollect the one to which you allude."

"No, Sire."

"At least, try!"

"It would be useless, Sire. Whenever the name of any compromised lady is concerned, my memory is like a coffer of brass, the key of which I have lost."

A dark cloud seemed to pass over the mind as well as across the face of the king; then, wishing to appear master of himself, he said, shaking his head, "And now for the affair concerning Holland."

"In the first place, Sire, at what hour will your Majesty receive the ambassadors?"

"Early in the morning."

"Eleven o'clock?"

"That is too late, — say nine o'clock."

"That will be too early, Sire."

"For friends, that would be a matter of no importance, — one does what one likes with one's friends; but for one's enemies, in that case nothing could be better than if they were to feel hurt. I should not be sorry, I confess, to have to finish altogether with these marsh-birds, who annoy me with their cries."

"It shall be as your Majesty desires. At nine o'clock, therefore, — I will give the necessary orders. Is it to be a formal audience?"

"No. I wish to have an explanation with them, and not to embitter matters, — a thing that happens always when many persons are present; but at the same time I wish to clear everything with them, in order not to have to begin over again."

"Your Majesty will inform me of the persons whom you wish to be present at the reception."

"I will make a list of them. Let us speak of the ambassadors; what do they want?"

"Allies with Spain, they gain nothing; allies with France, they lose much."

"How is that?"

"Allied with Spain, they see themselves bounded and protected by the possessions of their allies; they cannot touch them, however anxious they may be to do so. From Antwerp to Rotterdam is but a step, and that by way of the Scheldt and the Meuse. If they wish to make a bite at the Spanish cake, you, Sire, the son-in-law of the King of Spain, could with your cavalry go from your dominions to Brussels in two days. Their design is, therefore, only to quarrel so far with you, and only to make you suspect Spain so far, that you will not interfere with their own affairs."

"It would be far more simple, then, I should think," replied the king, "to form a solid alliance with me, by means of which I should gain something, while they would gain everything."

"Not so; for if by chance they were to have you, or France rather, as a boundary, your Majesty is not an agreeable neighbor; young, ardent, warlike, the King of France might inflict some serious mischief on Holland, especially if he were to get near her."

"I perfectly understand, M. Colbert, and you have explained it very clearly; but be good enough to tell me the conclusion you have reached."

"Your Majesty's own decisions are never deficient in wisdom."

"What will these ambassadors say to me?"

"They will tell your Majesty that they are ardently desirous of forming an alliance with you, which will be a falsehood; they will tell the Spaniards that the three powers ought to unite so as to check the prosperity of England, and that will equally be a falsehood; for at present the natural ally of your Majesty is England, who has ships when you have none, — England, who can counteract Dutch influence in India, — England, in fact, a monarchical country, to which your Majesty is attached by ties of relationship."

"Good; but how would you answer?"

"I should answer, Sire, with the greatest possible moderation of tone, that Holland is not perfectly well disposed towards the King of France; that the symptoms of public feeling among the Dutch are alarming as regards your Majesty; that certain medals have been struck with insulting devices."

"Towards me!" exclaimed the young king, excitedly.

"Oh, no, Sire, no! 'insulting' is not the word. I was mistaken; I ought to have said 'immeasurably flattering for the Batavians.'"

"Oh, if that be so, the pride of the Batavians is a matter of indifference to me," said the king, sighing.

"Your Majesty is right, a thousand times right. However, it is never bad policy, your Majesty knows better than myself, to be unjust in order to obtain a concession. If your Majesty were to complain irascibly of the Dutch, you would appear to them of more considerable importance."

"What are those medals of which you speak?" inquired Louis; "for if I allude to them, I ought to know what to say."

"Upon my word, Sire, I cannot very well tell you,—some overweeningly conceited device,—that is the sense of it; the words have nothing to do with the thing itself."

"Very good, I will mention the word 'medal,' and they can understand it if they like.'

"Oh, they will understand! Your Majesty can also slip in a few words about certain pamphlets which are in circulation."

"Never! Pamphlets befoul those who write them much more than those against whom they are written. M. Colbert, I thank you; you can leave me now. Do not forget the hour I have fixed, and be there yourself."

"Sire, I await your Majesty's list."

"True," returned the king; and he began to meditate. He did not think of the list in the slightest degree. The clock struck half-past eleven. The king's face revealed a violent conflict between pride and love. The political conversation had dispelled a good deal of the irritation which Louis had felt; and La Vallière's pale, worn features to his imagination spoke a very different language from that of the Dutch medals or the Batavian pamphlets. He sat for ten minutes debating within himself whether he should or should not return to La Vallière; but Colbert having respectfully insisted on having the list, the king blushed at thinking of love when business required his attention. He therefore dictated: the queen-mother, the queen, Madame, Madame de Motteville, Mademoiselle de Châtillon, Madame de Navailles; and for the men, Monsieur, Monsieur the Prince, M de Grammont, M. de Manicamp, M. de Saint-Aignan, and the officers on duty.

"The ministers?" said Colbert.

"As a matter of course, and the secretaries also."

"Sire, I will go and prepare everything; the orders will be at the different residences to-morrow."

"Say rather to-day," replied Louis mournfully, as the clock struck twelve. It was the very hour when poor La Vallière was almost dying from anguish and bitter suffering. The king's attendants entered, it being the hour of his retiring to rest; the queen, indeed, had been waiting for more than an hour. Louis accordingly retired to his bedroom with a sigh; but as he sighed, he congratulated himself on his courage, and applauded himself for having been as firm in love as in affairs of State.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE AMBASSADORS.

D'ARTAGNAN had, with very few exceptions, learned all the particulars of what we have just been relating; for among his friends he reckoned all the useful, serviceable people in the royal household, — officious attendants, who were proud of being recognized by the captain of the Musketeers, for the captain's influence was very great; and then, in addition to any ambitious views they may have had, they were proud of the worth implied in a recognition by a man as brave as D'Artagnan.

In this manner D'Artagnan learned every morning what he had not been able either to see or to ascertain the night before, from the simple fact of his not being ubiquitous; so that, with the information he had been able by his own means to pick up during the day, and with what he had gathered from others, he succeeded in making up a bundle of weapons, which he untied as occasion might require to choose such as he judged necessary; his two eyes rendered him the same service as the hundred eyes of Argus. Political secrets, private secrets, hints or scraps of conversation dropped by the courtiers on the threshold of the royal antechamber, — he managed to discover and to put away everything in the vast and impenetrable tomb of his memory, by the side of those royal secrets so dearly bought and faithfully preserved.

D'Artagnan therefore knew of the king's interview with Colbert, and of the appointment made for the ambassadors

in the morning, and consequently he knew that the question of the medals would be brought up; and while he was constructing a conversation upon a few chance words which had reached his ears, he returned to his post in the royal apartments, so as to be there at the moment the king should awake. It happened that the king woke very early, — proving thereby that he too, on his side, had slept but indifferently. Towards seven o'clock he half opened his door very gently. D'Artagnan was at his post. His Majesty was pale, and seemed wearied; he had not, moreover, quite finished dressing.

"Send for M. de Saint-Aignan," he said.

De Saint-Aignan very probably was waiting for a summons; for the messenger, when he reached his apartment, found him already dressed. De Saint-Aignan hastened to the king in obedience to the summons. A moment afterwards the king and De Saint-Aignan passed by together, but the king walking first. D'Artagnan went to the window which looked out upon the courtyards; he had no need to put himself to the trouble of watching in what direction the king went, for he had no difficulty in guessing beforehand where his Majesty was going. The king, in fact, went towards the apartments of the maids of honor, — a circumstance which in no way astonished D'Artagnan, for he more than suspected, although La Vallière had not breathed a syllable on the subject, that the king had some kind of reparation to make. De Saint-Aignan followed him, as he had done the previous evening, rather less uneasy in his mind though still slightly agitated; for he trusted that at seven o'clock in the morning there might be only himself and the king awake among the august guests at the palace.

D'Artagnan stood at the window, calm and careless. One could almost have sworn that he noticed nothing, and

was utterly ignorant who were these two hunters after adventures who were passing across the courtyards wrapped up in their cloaks. And yet all the while that D'Artagnan appeared not to be looking at them at all, he did not for one moment lose sight of them, and while he whistled that old march of the Musketeers, which he rarely recalled except under great emergencies, he conjectured and prophesied how terrible would be the storm which would be raised on the king's return.

In fact, when the king entered La Vallière's apartment and found the room empty and the bed untouched, he began to be alarmed, and called out to Montalais, who immediately rushed in; but her astonishment was equal to the king's. All that she could tell his Majesty was that she had fancied she had heard La Vallière weep during a portion of the night, but knowing that his Majesty had returned, she had not dared to inquire what was the matter.

"But," inquired the king, "where do you suppose she has gone?"

"Sire," replied Montalais, "Louise is of a very sentimental disposition, and often have I seen her rise before daybreak in order to go out into the garden; she may perhaps be there now."

This appeared probable, and the king immediately ran down the staircase in order to go in search of the fugitive. D'Artagnan observed that he was very pale, while talking excitedly with his companion, as he went towards the gardens, De Saint-Aignan following him, quite out of breath. D'Artagnan did not stir from the window, but went on whistling, looking as if he saw nothing and yet seeing everything. "Well, well," he murmured, when the king had disappeared, "his Majesty's passion is stronger than I thought; he is now doing, I think, what he never did for Mademoiselle de Mancini."

In a quarter of an hour the king again appeared; he had looked everywhere, was completely out of breath, and as a matter of course had not discovered anything. De Saint-Aignan, who still followed him, was fanning himself with his hat, and in a gasping voice asking for information from such of the servants as were about, — in fact, from every one he met. He met Manicamp, who had arrived from Fontainebleau by easy stages; for while the others had performed the journey in six hours, he had taken four-and-twenty.

"Have you seen Mademoiselle de la Vallière?" De Saint-Aignan asked him.

Whereupon Manicamp, dreamy and absent as usual, answered, thinking that some one was asking him about De Guiche, "Thank you, the count is a little better." And he continued on his way until he reached the antechamber where D'Artagnan was, whom he asked to explain how it was that the king looked, as he thought, so wild; to which D'Artagnan replied that he was quite mistaken, — that the king, on the contrary, was as lively and merry as he could possibly be.

In the midst of all this, eight o'clock struck. It was usual for the king to take his breakfast at this hour, for the code of etiquette prescribed that the king should always be hungry at eight o'clock. His breakfast was laid upon a small table in his bedroom, and he ate very fast. De Saint-Aignan, of whom he would not lose sight, held the napkin for him. He then disposed of several military audiences, during which he despatched De Saint-Aignan to see what he could find out. Then, while he was still preoccupied, still anxious, still watching for De Saint-Aignan's return, who had sent out his servants in every direction to make inquiries, and had also gone himself,

the hour of nine struck, and the king forthwith passed into his cabinet.

At the first stroke of the clock the ambassadors themselves entered; and as it finished striking, the two queens and Madame made their appearance. There were three ambassadors from Holland, and two from Spain. The king glanced at them, and then bowed; and at the same moment De Saint-Aignan ,entered, — an entrance which the king regarded as far more important though in a different way than that of the ambassadors, however numerous they were, and from whatever country they came; and so, setting everything else aside, the king made a sign of interrogation to De Saint-Aignan, which the latter answered by a most decisive negative. The king almost entirely lost his courage; but as the queens, the members of the nobility who were present, and the ambassadors had their eyes fixed upon him, he overcame his emotion by a violent effort, and invited the latter to speak. Whereupon one of the Spanish deputies made a long oration, in which he boasted the advantages that the Spanish alliance would offer.

The king interrupted him, saying, "Monsieur, I trust that whatever is advantageous for France must be exceedingly advantageous for Spain."

This remark, and particularly the peremptory tone in which it was pronounced, made the ambassadors turn pale, and brought the color into the cheeks of the two queens, who both, being Spanish, felt their pride of relationship and nationality wounded by this reply.

The Dutch ambassador then began to speak in his turn, and complained of the prejudice which the king exhibited against the government of his country.

The king interrupted him, saying, "It is very singular, Monsieur, that you should come with any complaint,

when it is I, rather, who have reason to complain; and yet, you see, I do not."

"Complain, Sire?" asked the gentleman from Holland, "and in what respect?"

The king smiled bitterly. "Will you blame me, Monsieur," he said, "if I should happen to entertain suspicions against a government which authorizes and protects public insulters?"

"Sire!"

"I tell you," resumed the king, exciting himself from his own personal annoyance rather than from political grounds, "that Holland is a land of refuge for all who hate me, and especially for all who malign me."

"Oh, Sire!—"

"You wish for proofs, perhaps? Very good; they can be had easily enough. Whence proceed all those insulting pamphlets which represent me as a monarch without glory and without authority? Your printing-presses groan under their number. If my secretaries were here, I would mention the titles of the works as well as the names of the printers."

"Sire," replied the ambassador, "a pamphlet cannot be regarded as the work of a nation. Is it just, is it reasonable, that a great and powerful monarch like your Majesty should render a whole people responsible for the crime of a few madmen, who are dying of hunger?"

"That may be the case, I admit, Monsieur. But when the mint at Amsterdam strikes off medals which reflect disgrace upon me, is that also the crime of a few madmen?"

"Medals?" stammered the ambassador.

"Medals," repeated the king, looking at Colbert.

"Your Majesty," the ambassador ventured, "should be quite sure—"

The king still looked at Colbert; but Colbert appeared not to understand him, and maintained an unbroken silence, notwithstanding the king's repeated hints. D'Artagnan then approached the king, and taking a piece of money out of his pocket placed it in the king's hands, saying, "That is the medal to which your Majesty alludes."

The king looked at it, and with a glance which ever since he had become his own master had been always soaring in its gaze, could observe an insulting device representing Holland, like Joshua, arresting the progress of the sun, with this inscription, *In conspectu meo stetit sol.*

"'In my presence the sun stands still,'" exclaimed the king, furiously. "Ah, you will hardly deny it, now, I trust!"

"And the sun," said D'Artagnan, "is this," as he pointed to the panels of the cabinet, where the sun was brilliantly represented in every direction with this motto, *Nec pluribus impar.*

Louis's anger, increased by the bitterness of his own personal sufferings, hardly required this additional circumstance to foment it. Every one saw, from the kindling passion in the king's eyes, that an explosion was most imminent. A look from Colbert kept the storm from bursting forth. The ambassador ventured to frame excuses by saying that the vanity of nations was a matter of little consequence; that Holland was proud that with such limited resources she had maintained her rank as a great nation, even against powerful monarchs; and that if a little smoke had intoxicated his countrymen, the king would be so gracious as to excuse this intoxication.

The king seemed seeking for advice. He looked at Colbert, who remained impassive; then at D'Artagnan, who simply shrugged his shoulders, — a movement which was like the opening of the flood-gates whereby the king's

anger, which he had restrained for so long, was set free. As no one knew what direction his anger might take, all preserved a dead silence. The second ambassador took advantage of it to begin his excuses also. While he was speaking, and while the king, who had again gradually returned to his own personal reflections, listened to the voice, full of nervous anxiety, with the air of an absent man listening to the murmuring of a cascade, D'Artagnan, on whose left hand De Saint-Aignan was standing, approached the latter, and in a voice well calculated to reach the king's ears, said, "Have you heard the news, Count?"

"What news?" said De Saint-Aignan.

"Why, about La Vallière?"

The king started, and involuntarily advanced a step nearer to them.

"What has happened to La Vallière?" inquired De Saint-Aignan, in a tone which can very easily be imagined.

"Ah, poor girl!" said D'Artagnan; "she is going to take the veil."

"The veil!" exclaimed De Saint-Aignan.

"The veil!" cried the king, in the midst of the ambassador's discourse; but then, mindful of the rules of etiquette, he mastered himself, still listening however with rapt attention.

"What order?" inquired De Saint-Aignan.

"The Carmelites of Chaillot."

"Who the deuce told you that?"

"She did herself."

"You have seen her, then?"

"It was I who escorted her to the Carmelites."

The king did not lose a word; his blood boiled within him, and his face began to flush.

"But what was the cause of her flight?" inquired De Saint-Aignan.

"Because the poor girl was driven away from the court yesterday," replied D'Artagnan.

He had no sooner said this than the king, with an authoritative gesture, said to the ambassador, "Enough, Monsieur, enough!" Then, advancing towards the captain, he exclaimed, "Who says that La Vallière is going to take the religious vows?"

"M. d'Artagnan," answered the favorite.

"Is it true what you say?" said the king, turning towards the musketeer.

"As true as truth itself."

The king clinched his hands, and turned pale. "You added something further, M. d'Artagnan," he said.

"I know nothing more, Sire."

"You added that Mademoiselle de la Vallière had been driven away from the court."

"Yes, Sire."

"Is that true also?"

"Ascertain it for yourself, Sire."

"And from whom?"

"Oh!" said D'Artagnan, like a man declining to say anything further.

The king gave a violent start, regardless of ambassadors, ministers, courtiers, and politics. The queen-mother rose; she had heard everything, or if she had not heard everything, she had guessed it. Madame, almost fainting from anger and fear, endeavored to rise as the queen-mother had done; but she sank down again upon her chair, which by an involuntary movement she made roll back.

"Messieurs," said the king, "the audience is over. I will communicate my answer, or rather my will, to Spain and to Holland;" and with an imperious gesture he dismissed the ambassadors.

"Take care, my son," said the queen-mother, indignantly, "take care! You are hardly master of yourself, I think."

"Ah, Madame," roared the young lion, with a terrible gesture, "if I am not master of myself, I will be, I promise you, of those who do me outrage! Come with me, M. d'Artagnan, come!" and he left the room in the midst of general stupefaction and dismay.

The king hastily descended the staircase, and was about to cross the courtyard.

"Sire," said D'Artagnan, "your Majesty mistakes the way."

"No; I am going to the stables."

"That is useless, Sire, for I have horses ready for your Majesty."

The king's only answer was a look; but this look promised more than the ambition of three D'Artagnans could have dared to hope.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

CHAILLOT.

ALTHOUGH they had not been summoned, Manicamp and Malicorne had followed the king and D'Artagnan. They were both exceedingly intelligent men, except that Malicorne was often too precipitate, owing to his ambition, while Manicamp was frequently too tardy, owing to his indolence. On this occasion, however, they seized the proper moment. Five horses were waiting in readiness. Two were taken by the king and D'Artagnan, two others by Manicamp and Malicorne, while a groom belonging to the stables mounted the fifth. The whole cavalcade set off at a gallop. D'Artagnan had been very careful in his selection of the horses; they were the very horses for distressed lovers, — horses which not simply ran, but flew.

Within ten minutes after their departure, the cavalcade, amid a cloud of dust, arrived at Chaillot. The king literally threw himself off his horse; but notwithstanding his rapidity of movement, he found D'Artagnan already at his horse's bridle. With a sign of acknowledgment to the musketeer, he threw the bridle to the groom, then darted into the vestibule, violently pushed open the door, and entered the reception-room. Manicamp, Malicorne, and the groom remained outside, D'Artagnan alone following his master. When he entered the reception-room, the first object which met his gaze was Louise herself, not on her knees, but lying at the foot of a large stone crucifix.

The young girl was stretched upon the damp flag-stones, scarcely visible in the gloom of the apartment, which was lighted only by means of a narrow window, protected by bars, and completely shaded by climbing plants. She was alone, inanimate, cold as the stone upon which her body lay. When the king saw her in this state he thought she was dead, and uttered a terrible cry, which made D'Artagnan hurry into the room. The king had already passed an arm round her body, and D'Artagnan assisted him in raising the poor girl, of whom the torpor of death seemed already to have taken possession. The king then took her wholly into his arms, and tried to warm with his kisses her icy hands and temples.

D'Artagnan seized the call-bell, and rang with all his might. The Carmelite Sisters immediately hastened at the summons, and uttered loud exclamations of alarm and indignation at the sight of the two men holding a woman in their arms. The superior also hurried in; but far more a creature of the world than any of the female members of the court, notwithstanding her austerity, she recognized the king at the first glance, by the respect which those present exhibited for him, as well as by the imperious and authoritative way in which he had thrown the whole establishment into confusion. As soon as she saw the king, she retired to her own apartments, in order to avoid compromising her dignity. But by the nuns she sent various cordials, — Queen of Hungary water, balm, etc., — and ordered that all the doors should be immediately closed, — a command which was just in time, for the king's distress was fast becoming of a most clamorous and despairing character. He had almost decided to send for his own physician, when La Vallière exhibited signs of returning animation. The first object which met her gaze, as she opened her eyes, was the king at her feet.

In all probability she did not recognize him, for she uttered a deep sigh of anguish and distress. Louis fixed his eyes devouringly upon her face; and when in the course of a few moments her wandering looks returned to the king, she recognized him and endeavored to tear herself from his embrace.

"Oh, heavens!" she murmured, "is not the sacrifice yet made?"

"No, no!" exclaimed the king; "and it shall not be made, I swear."

Notwithstanding her weakness and utter despair, she rose from the ground, saying, "It must be made, however, — it must be; so do not stay me in my purpose!"

"I leave you to sacrifice yourself! — I! Never, never!" exclaimed the king.

"Well," murmured D'Artagnan, "I may as well go now. As soon as they begin to speak, we will spare them our ears;" and he left the room, leaving the two lovers alone.

"Sire," continued La Vallière, "not another word, I implore you! Do not destroy the only future I can hope for, — my salvation; do not destroy the glory and brightness of your own future for a mere caprice."

"A caprice!" cried the king.

"Oh, Sire, it is now only that I can clearly see into your heart!"

"You, Louise? What do you mean?"

"An inexplicable and unreasonable impulse may momentarily appear to offer a sufficient excuse for your conduct; but there are duties imposed upon you which are incompatible with your regard for a poor girl such as I am. So forget me!"

"I forget you!"

"You have already done so."

"Rather would I die!"

"Sire, you cannot love one whose peace of mind you hold so lightly, and whom you so cruelly abandoned last night to the bitterness of death."

"What can you mean? Explain yourself, Louise!"

"What did you ask me yesterday morning? To love you. What did you promise me in return? Never to let midnight pass without offering me an opportunity of reconciliation whenever your anger might be aroused against me."

"Oh, forgive me, Louise, forgive me! I was almost mad from jealousy."

"Jealousy is an unworthy sentiment, Sire, which springs up like tares that have been cut down. You may become jealous again, and will end by killing me. Be merciful, then, and leave me now to die!"

"Another word, Mademoiselle, in that strain, and you will see me expire at your feet!"

"No, no, Sire, I am better acquainted with my own demerits. Believe me, and do not sacrifice yourself for an unhappy girl whom all despise."

"Oh, name those whom you accuse, name them!"

"I have no complaints, Sire, to prefer against any one, no one but myself to accuse. Farewell, Sire! You are compromising yourself in speaking to me in such a manner."

"Oh, be careful, Louise, in what you say; for you are reducing me to the very depths of despair."

"Oh, Sire, Sire, leave me to the protection of Heaven, I implore you!"

"Heaven itself shall not tear you from me."

"Save me, then," cried the poor girl, "from those determined and pitiless enemies who are thirsting to destroy my very life and honor too. If you have courage enough to love me, show at least that you have power enough to

defend me. But, no; she whom you say you love, others insult and mock, and drive away in disgrace;" and the gentle-hearted girl, forced by her own bitter distress to accuse others, wrung her hands in an uncontrollable agony of tears.

"You have been driven away!" exclaimed the king. "This is the second time I have heard that said."

"I have been driven away with shame and ignominy, Sire. You see, then, that I have no other protector but Heaven, no consolation but prayer, and that this cloister is my only refuge."

"My palace, my whole court, shall be yours. Oh, fear nothing further now, Louise! Those who yesterday drove you away, be they men or women, shall to-morrow tremble before you. To-morrow, do I say? Nay, this very day have I already shown my displeasure, — have I already threatened. It is in my power, even now, to hurl the thunderbolt which I have hitherto withheld. Louise, Louise, you shall be cruelly avenged; tears of blood shall repay your tears. Give me only the names of your enemies."

"Never, never!"

"How can I show my anger, then?"

"Sire, those upon whom your anger would have to fall would force you to withhold your hand."

"Oh, you do not know me!" cried the king, exasperated. "Rather than draw back, I would sacrifice my kingdom and curse my family. Yes, I would even destroy this arm, if it were so cowardly as not to annihilate all those who had ventured to make themselves the enemies of the gentlest and best of creatures;" and as he said these words, Louis struck his fist violently against the oaken wainscoting, which returned an ominous sound.

La Vallière was alarmed, for the wrath of this all-powerful young man had something imposing and threatening in it, and, like that of the tempest, might be mortal in its effects. She, who thought that her own sufferings could not be surpassed, was overwhelmed by a suffering which revealed itself by menace and by violence. "Sire," she said, "for the last time I implore you to leave me! Already do I feel strengthened by the calm seclusion of this asylum; and I feel more calm under the protection of Heaven, for all the petty human meannesses of this world are forgotten beneath the Divine protection. Once more, then, Sire, I implore you to leave me to my God!"

"Confess, rather," cried Louis, "that you have never loved me; admit that my humility and my repentance are flattering to your pride, but that my distress affects you not; admit that the king of France is no longer regarded as a lover whose tenderness of devotion is capable of working out your happiness, but that he is a despot whose caprice has utterly destroyed in your heart the very last fibre of tender feeling. Do not say that you are seeking Heaven; say rather that you are fleeing from the king. No, Heaven is not accessory to relentless vows: it receives penitence and remorse; it pardons, it is indulgent to love."

Louise's heart was wrung within her, as she listened to his passionate utterance, which made the fever of passion course through every vein in her body. "But did you not hear me say that I have been driven away, scorned, despised?".

"I will make you the most respected, the most adored, and the most envied of my whole court."

"Prove to me that you have not ceased to love me."

"In what way?"

"By leaving me."

"I will prove it to you by never leaving you again."

"But do you imagine, Sire, that I shall allow that, — do you imagine that I will let you come to an open rupture with every member of your family, — do you imagine that for my sake I will let you abandon mother, wife, and sister?"

"Ah, you have named them, then, at last; it is they, then, who have wrought this grievous injury! By the Heaven above us, I will punish them."

"That is the reason why the future terrifies me, why I refuse everything, why I do not wish you to avenge me. Tears enough have already been shed, sufficient sorrow and affliction have already been occasioned. Oh, never will I be the cause of sorrow or affliction or distress to any one, whoever it may be; for I have mourned and suffered and wept too much myself!"

"And do you count my sufferings, my distress, and my tears as nothing?"

"In Heaven's name, Sire, do not speak to me in that manner! I need all my courage to enable me to accomplish the sacrifice."

"Louise, Louise, I implore you! Command, dictate, avenge yourself, or pardon; but do not abandon me!"

"Alas, Sire, we must part!"

"You do not love me, then!"

"Heaven knows I do!"

"It is false, Louise; it is false."

"Oh, Sire, if I did not love you, I should let you do what you please, — I should let you revenge me, in return for the insult which has been inflicted on me, — I should accept the sweet triumph to my pride which you propose; and yet you cannot deny that I reject even the sweet compensation which your affection affords, — that affection

which for me is life itself, for I wished to die when I thought that you loved me no longer."

"Yes, yes, I now know, I now perceive it; you are the holiest, the most adorable of women. There is no one so worthy as yourself, not alone of my own respect and devotion, but also of the respect and devotion of all who surround me, and therefore shall no one be loved like yourself, Louise,—no one shall ever possess the influence over me that you wield. Yes, I swear to you, I would dash society to pieces like a glass, if it should hinder me. You wish me to be calm, to forgive; be it so, I will calm myself. You wish to reign by gentleness and clemency; I will be clement and gentle. Dictate for me the conduct you wish me to adopt, and I will obey blindly."

"In Heaven's name, no, Sire! What am I, a poor girl, to dictate a syllable to so great a monarch as yourself?"

"You are my life and my soul! Is it not the soul that rules the body?"

"You love me, then, Sire?"

"On my knees, with my hands upraised to you, with all the strength and power which Heaven has given me. I love you so deeply that I would happily lay down my life for you at your merest wish."

"Oh, Sire, now that I know you love me, I have nothing more to wish for in the whole world! Give me your hand, Sire; and then farewell! I have enjoyed in this life all the happiness which was my due."

"Oh, no! Say only that your life is beginning. Your happiness is not a happiness of yesterday; it is of to-day, of to-morrow, ever-enduring. The future is yours; everything which is mine is yours too. Away with these ideas of separation! Away with these gloomy, despairing thoughts! You will live for me, as I will live for you, Louise!" and he threw himself at her feet, em-

bracing her knees with the wildest transports of joy and gratitude.

"Oh, Sire, Sire! all that is but a wild dream."

"Why a wild dream?"

"Because I cannot return to the court. Exiled, how can I see you again? Would it not be far better to bury myself in a cloister, with the rich consolation that your affection gives me, with the latest pulses of your heart beating for me, and your latest confession of love still ringing in my ears?"

"Exiled, — you!" exclaimed Louis XIV.; "and who exiles when I recall?"

"Oh, Sire, something which rules superior to kings even, — the world and public opinion. Reflect for a moment! You cannot love a woman who has been ignominiously driven away, — one whom your mother has stained with suspicion, one whom your sister has disgraced with punishment, such a woman, indeed, would be unworthy of you."

"Unworthy! — one who belongs to me?"

"Yes, Sire, precisely on that account; from the very moment when she belongs to you, your mistress is unworthy."

"You are right, Louise; every shade of delicacy of feeling is yours. Very well, you shall not be exiled."

"Ah, you have not heard Madame; that is very clear."

"I will appeal from her to my mother."

"Again, Sire, you have not seen your mother."

"She, also! Poor Louise! every one's hand, then, is against you."

"Yes, yes, poor Louise, who was already bending beneath the fury of the storm, when you arrived and crushed her beneath the weight of your displeasure."

"Oh, forgive me!"

"You will not, I know, be able to make either of them yield. Believe me, the evil cannot be repaired, for I will not allow you to use violence or to exercise your authority."

"Very well, Louise, to prove to you how fondly I love you, I will do one thing, — I will see Madame; I will make her revoke her sentence, I will compel her to do so."

"Compel? Oh, no, no!"

"True; you are right. I will bend her."

Louise shook her head.

"I will entreat her, if it be necessary," said Louis. "Will you believe in my affection after that?"

Louise drew herself up. "Oh, never, never shall you humiliate yourself on my account; rather, a thousand times, would I die!"

Louis reflected, his features assumed a dark expression. "I will love as much as you have loved," he said; "I will suffer as keenly as you have suffered; this shall be my expiation in your eyes. Come, Mademoiselle, let us put aside these paltry considerations; let us show ourselves as great as our sufferings, as strong as our affection for each other;" and as he said this, he took her in his arms, and encircled her waist with both his hands, saying, "My own love! my life! follow me."

She made a final effort, in which she concentrated no longer all her firmness of will, for that had long since been overcome, but all her physical strength. "No!" she replied weakly, "no, no! I should die of shame."

"No! you shall return like a queen. No one knows that you have left, — except, indeed, D'Artagnan."

"He has betrayed me, then?"

"In what way?"

"He promised me faithfully — "

"I promised not to say anything to the king," said D'Artagnan, showing his keen face through the half-open door, "and I kept my word. I was speaking to M. de Saint-Aignan; and it was not my fault if the king overheard me, was it, Sire?"

"It is quite true," said the king; "forgive him."

La Vallière smiled, and held out her small white hand to the musketeer.

"M. d'Artagnan," said the king, delighted, "be good enough to see if you can find a carriage for Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"Sire," replied the captain, "the carriage is waiting."

"Well, there is a model servant!" exclaimed the king.

"You have taken a long time to find it out," muttered D'Artagnan, notwithstanding he was flattered by the praise bestowed upon him.

La Vallière was overcome; after a little further hesitation she allowed herself to be led away, half fainting, by her royal lover. But as she was on the point of leaving the room, she tore herself from the king's grasp, and returned to the stone crucifix, which she kissed, saying, "O Heaven! it was thou who drewest me hither, thou who hast rejected me; but thy grace is infinite. Whenever I shall again return, forget that I have ever separated myself from thee; for when I return, it will be — never to leave thee again."

The king could not restrain his emotion, and D'Artagnan, even, wiped away a tear. Louis bore the young girl away, lifted her into the carriage, and directed D'Artagnan to seat himself beside her; while he, mounting his horse, spurred violently towards the Palais-Royal, where immediately on his arrival he sent to request an audience of Madame.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

MADAME.

From the manner in which the king had dismissed the ambassadors, even the least clear-sighted persons had imagined war would ensue. The ambassadors themselves, but slightly acquainted with the king's domestic affairs, had interpreted as directed against themselves the celebrated sentence: "If I be not master of myself, I at least will be so of those who do me outrage." Happily for the destinies of France and Holland, Colbert had followed them out of the king's presence for the purpose of explaining matters to them; but the two queens and Madame, who were perfectly aware of every circumstance that had taken place in their own households, having heard the remark so full of dark meaning, retired to their own apartments in no little fear and chagrin. Madame especially felt that the royal anger might fall upon her; and as she was brave and exceedingly proud, instead of seeking support from the queen-mother, she had returned to her own apartments, if not without some uneasiness, at least without any intention of avoiding the encounter.

Anne of Austria from time to time, at frequent intervals, sent messengers to learn if the king had returned. The silence which the whole palace preserved upon the matter and upon Louise's disappearance was indicative of a long train of misfortunes to all those who knew the haughty and irritable humor of the king. But Madame, remaining firm in spite of all the flying rumors, shut her-

self up in her apartments, called Montalais to her, and with a voice as calm as she could possibly command, desired her to relate all she knew about the event itself. Just as the eloquent Montalais was concluding with all kinds of oratorical precautions, and was recommending that Madame should show forbearance towards La Vallière, M. Malicorne made his appearance to beg an audience of Madame, on behalf of his Majesty. Montalais's worthy friend bore upon his countenance all the signs of the very liveliest emotion. It was impossible to be mistaken; the interview which the king requested would be one of the most interesting chapters in the history of the hearts of kings and of men.

Madame was disturbed by her brother-in-law's arrival; she did not expect it so soon, nor had she, indeed, expected any direct step on Louis's part. Besides, all women, who wage war so successfully by indirect means, are invariably neither very skilful nor very strong when it becomes a question of accepting a pitched battle. Madame, however, was not one who ever drew back, — she had the very opposite defect or qualification, in whichever light it may be considered; she took an exaggerated view of what constituted real courage; and therefore the king's message, of which Malicorne had been the bearer, produced the effect upon her of the trumpet proclaiming the beginning of hostilities. She therefore boldly accepted the gage of battle. Five minutes afterwards the king ascended the staircase. His color was heightened from having ridden hard. His dusty and disordered clothes formed a singular contrast with the fresh and perfectly arranged toilet of Madame, who however turned pale under her rouge as he entered. Louis lost no time in approaching the object of his visit; he sat down, and Montalais disappeared. Madame seated herself opposite the king.

"My dear sister," said the king, "you are aware that Mademoiselle de la Vallière fled from her own room this morning, and that she has retired to a cloister, overwhelmed by grief and despair." As he pronounced these words, the king's voice was singularly moved.

"Your Majesty is the first to inform me of it," replied Madame.

"I should have thought that you might have learned it this morning, during the reception of the ambassadors," said the king.

"From your emotion, Sire, I imagined that something extraordinary had happened, but did not know what it was."

The king, with his usual frankness, went straight to the point. "My sister," said he, "why have you sent Mademoiselle de la Vallière away?"

"Because I had reason to be dissatisfied with her service," replied Madame, dryly.

The king became crimson, and his eyes kindled with a fire which it required all Madame's courage to endure. He mastered his anger, however, and continued: "A stronger reason than that is surely requisite, my sister, for one so good and kind as you are, to turn away and dishonor, not only the young girl herself, but every member of her family as well. You know that the whole city has its eyes fixed upon the conduct of the female portion of the court. To dismiss a maid of honor is to attribute a crime to her — at the very least, a fault. Of what crime, what fault, has Mademoiselle de la Vallière been guilty?"

"Since you constitute yourself the protector of Mademoiselle de la Vallière," replied Madame, coldly, "I will give you those explanations which I should have a perfect right to withhold from every one."

"Even from the king!" exclaimed Louis, as with a sudden gesture he replaced his hat on his head.

"You have called me your sister," said Madame, "and I am in my own apartments."

"It matters not," said the youthful monarch, ashamed at having been hurried away by his anger; "neither you, Madame, nor any one else in this kingdom, can assert a right to withhold an explanation in my presence."

"Since that is the way you regard it," said Madame, with repressed anger, "all that remains for me to do is to bow to your Majesty, and to be silent."

"No; let there be no equivocation between us."

"The protection with which you surround Mademoiselle de la Vallière does not impose any respect."

"No equivocation, I repeat. You are perfectly aware that as head of the nobility of France I am accountable to all for the honor of every family; you dismiss Mademoiselle de la Vallière, or whoever else it may be —" Madame shrugged her shoulders. "Or whoever else it may be, I repeat," continued the king; "and as in acting in that manner you cast a dishonorable reflection upon that person, I ask you for an explanation, in order that I may confirm or annul the sentence."

"Annul my sentence!" exclaimed Madame, haughtily. "What! when I have discharged one of my attendants, do you order me to take her back again?"

The king remained silent.

"This would cease to be an excess of power merely, Sire; it would be indecorous and unseemly."

"Madame!"

"As a woman, I should revolt against an abuse so insulting to all propriety; I should no longer be able to regard myself as a princess of your blood, a daughter of a monarch; I should be the meanest of creatures, more humble than the servant I had sent away."

The king rose from his seat with anger. "It cannot

be a heart," he cried, "which you have beating in your bosom; if you act in such a way with me, I may have reason to act with similar severity."

It sometimes happens that in a battle a chance ball may reach its mark. The observation which the king had made without any particular intention struck Madame home, and staggered her for a moment; some day or other she might indeed have reason to dread reprisals. "At all events, Sire," she said, "explain what you require."

"I ask, Madame, what has Mademoiselle de la Vallière done to you?"

"She is the most cunning fomenter of intrigues that I know; she was the occasion of two personal friends engaging in mortal combat, and has made people talk of her in such shameless terms that the whole court is indignant at the mere sound of her name."

"She! she!" cried the king.

"Under her soft and hypocritical manner," continued Madame, "she hides a disposition full of foul and dark deceit."

"She!"

"You may possibly be deceived, Sire, but I know her right well. She is capable of creating dissension between the most affectionate relatives and the most intimate friends. You see that she has already sown discord between us two."

"I do assure you —" said the king.

"Sire, look well into the case as it stood! We were living on the most friendly understanding, and by the artfulness of her tales and complaints she has set your Majesty against me."

"I swear to you," said the king, "that on no occasion has a bitter word ever passed her lips; I swear that even

in my wild bursts of passion she would never allow me to menace any one; and I swear, too, that you do not possess a more devoted and respectful friend."

"Friend!" said Madame, with an expression of supreme disdain.

"Take care, Madame!" said the king; "you forget that you now understand me, and that from this moment everything is equalized. Mademoiselle de la Vallière will be whatever I may choose her to become, and to-morrow, if I so determine, she shall be qualified to sit upon a throne."

"She will not have been born to a throne, at least; and whatever you may do can affect the future alone, but cannot affect the past."

"Madame, towards you I have shown every kind consideration and every eager attention; do not remind me that I am master here."

"That is the second time, Sire, that you have made that remark, and I have already had the honor of informing you that I am ready to submit."

"In that case, then, will you confer upon me the favor of receiving Mademoiselle de la Vallière back again?"

"For what purpose, Sire, since you have a throne to bestow upon her? I am too insignificant to protect so exalted a personage."

"A truce to this bitter and disdainful spirit! Grant me her forgiveness."

"Never!"

"You drive me, then, to open warfare in my own family?"

"I, too, have my own family, where I can find refuge."

"Do you mean that as a threat, and could you forget yourself so far? Do you believe that if you push the affront to that extent, your family would sustain you?"

"I hope, Sire, that you will not force me to take any step which would be unworthy of my rank."

"I hoped that you would remember our friendship, and that you would treat me as a brother."

Madame paused for a moment. "I do not disown you for a brother," she said, "in refusing your Majesty an injustice."

"An injustice!"

"Oh, Sire, if I informed others of La Vallière's conduct, — if the queen knew — "

"Come, come, Henrietta, let your heart speak. Remember that you have loved me; remember, too, that human hearts should be as merciful as the heart of our sovereign Master. Do not be inflexible with others; forgive La Vallière!"

"I cannot; she has offended me."

"But for my sake?"

"Sire, for your sake I would do anything in the world except that."

"You will drive me to despair, — you compel me to turn to the last resource of weak people; you then incite me to wrath and discord?"

"I advise you to be reasonable."

"Reasonable! I can be so no longer."

"Nay, Sire, I pray you — "

"For pity's sake, my sister; it is the first time I have entreated any one, and I have no hope in any one but in you."

"Oh, Sire, you are weeping!"

"From rage, from humiliation! — that I, the king, should have been obliged to descend to entreaty! I shall hate this moment during my whole life. My sister, you have made me suffer in one moment more pain than I could have anticipated in the greatest extremity in life;"

and the king rose and gave free vent to his tears, which in fact were tears of anger and of shame.

Madame was not touched exactly, — for the best women, when their pride is hurt, are without pity, — but she was afraid that the tears the king was shedding might possibly carry away every soft and tender feeling in his heart. "Give what commands you please, Sire," she said, "and since you prefer my humiliation to your own, — although mine is public, and yours has been witnessed but by myself alone, — speak! I will obey your Majesty."

"No, no, Henrietta!" exclaimed Louis, transported with gratitude; "you will have yielded to a brother's wishes."

"I no longer have any brother, since I obey."

"Will you accept my kingdom in grateful acknowledgment?"

"How passionately you love, Sire, when you do love!"

He did not answer. He had seized upon Madame's hand and covered it with kisses. "And so you will receive this poor girl back again, and will forgive her; you will find how gentle and pure-hearted she is."

"I will maintain her in my household."

"No, you will give her your friendship, my dear sister."

"I have never liked her."

"Well, for my sake you will treat her kindly, will you not, Henrietta?"

"I will treat her as your mistress."

The king rose suddenly to his feet. By this word which had so fatally escaped her lips, Madame had destroyed all the merit of her sacrifice. The king felt freed from all obligation. Exasperated beyond measure, and bitterly offended, he replied, "I thank you, Madame; I shall never forget the service you have rendered me;"

and saluting her with an affectation of ceremony, he took his leave of her. As he passed before a glass, he saw that his eyes were red, and he stamped with anger. But it was too late; for Malicorne and D'Artagnan, who were standing at the door, had seen his eyes.

"The king has been crying," thought Malicorne.

D'Artagnan approached the king with a respectful air, and said in a low tone, "Sire, it would be better to return to your own apartments by the small staircase."

"Why?"

"Because the dust of the road has left its traces on your face," said D'Artagnan. "*Mordioux!*" he thought, "when the king has been giving way like a child, let those look to it who may bring sorrow to her for whom the king has wept."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

MADEMOISELLE DE LA VALLIÈRE'S POCKET-HANDKERCHIEF.

MADAME was not bad-hearted; she was only hasty and impetuous. The king was not imprudent he was only in love. Hardly had they entered into this sort of compact, which terminated in La Vallière's recall, when both sought to make as much as they could by their bargain. The king wished to see La Vallière every moment in the day, while Madame, who was sensible of the king's annoyance ever since he had so entreated her, would not abandon La Vallière without a contest. She planted every conceivable difficulty in the king's path He was in fact obliged, in order to get a glimpse of La Vallière, to be exceedingly devoted in his attentions to his sister-in-law; and this, indeed, was Madame's plan of policy. As she had chosen some one to second her efforts, and as this person was Montalais, the king found himself completely hemmed in every time he paid Madame a visit; he was surrounded, and was never left a moment alone.

Madame displayed in her conversation a charm of manner and brilliancy of wit which eclipsed everything. Montalais followed her example, and soon rendered herself quite insupportable to the king, — which was, in fact, the very thing she had expected. She then set Malicorne at the king, who found the means of informing his Majesty that there was a young person belonging to the court

who was exceedingly miserable; and on the king's inquiring who this person was, Malicorne replied that it was Mademoiselle de Montalais. To this the king declared that it was perfectly just that a person should be unhappy when she rendered others so. Whereupon Malicorne explained how matters stood; for he had received his directions from Montalais.

The king began to open his eyes. He remarked that as soon as he made his appearance, Madame made hers too; that she remained in the corridors until after he had left; that she accompanied him to the outermost door, fearing that he might speak in the antechambers to one of her maids of honor. One evening she went further still. The king was seated, surrounded by the ladies who were present, and held in his hand, concealed by his lace ruffle, a small note which he wished to slip into La Vallière's hand. Madame guessed both his intention and the letter too. It was very difficult to prevent the king from going wherever he pleased, and yet it was necessary to prevent his going near La Vallière to greet her, as by so doing he could let the note fall into her lap behind her fan or into her pocket-handkerchief. The king, who was also on the watch, suspected that a snare was being laid for him. He rose and pushed his chair, without affectation, near Mademoiselle de Châtillon, with whom he began to talk in a light tone. They were amusing themselves in making rhymes; from Mademoiselle de Châtillon he went to Montalais, and then to Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente. And thus, by this skilful manœuvre, he found himself seated in front of La Vallière, whom he completely concealed. Madame pretended to be greatly occupied; she was altering a group of flowers that she was working in tapestry. The king showed the corner of his letter to La Vallière, and the latter held out her handkerchief with a look which

signified, "Put the letter inside" Then, as the king had placed his own handkerchief upon his chair, he was adroit enough to let it fall on the ground, so that La Vallière slipped her handkerchief on the chair. The king took it up quietly, without any one observing what he did, placed the letter within it, and returned the handkerchief to the chair. There was only just time for La Vallière to stretch out her hand to take the handkerchief with its valuable contents.

But Madame, who had observed everything that had passed, said to Mademoiselle de Châtillon, "Châtillon, be good enough to pick up the king's handkerchief, if you please; it has fallen on the carpet"

The young girl obeyed with the utmost precipitation; and the king having moved from his seat, and La Vallière being in no little degree nervous and confused, another handkerchief was seen on the chair.

"Ah! I beg your Majesty's pardon," said Mademoiselle de Châtillon; "you have two handkerchiefs, I perceive."

And the king was accordingly obliged to put into his pocket La Vallière's handkerchief as well as his own. He certainly gained that souvenir of Louise; but she lost a copy of verses which had cost the king ten hours' hard labor, and which, so far as she was concerned, was perhaps as good as a long poem. It would be impossible to describe the king's anger and La Vallière's despair; but shortly afterwards a circumstance occurred which was more than remarkable.

When the king left, in order to retire to his own apartments, Malicorne — informed of what had passed, one can hardly tell how — was waiting in the antechamber. The antechambers of the Palais-Royal are naturally dark; and in the evening, as little ceremony was observed at Madame's,

they were but indifferently lighted. Nothing pleased the king more than this dim light. As a general rule, Love, whose mind and heart are constantly in a blaze, dislikes light anywhere else than in the mind and heart. And so the antechamber was dark; a single page carried a torch before the king, who walked on slowly, greatly annoyed at what had recently occurred. Malicorne passed close to the king, almost stumbled against him in fact, and begged his forgiveness with the profoundest humility; but the king, who was in an exceedingly ill temper, was very sharp in his reproof to Malicorne, who disappeared as soon and as quietly as he possibly could. Louis retired to rest, having had that evening a little misunderstanding with the queen; and the next day, as soon as he entered the cabinet, the desire seized him to kiss La Vallière's handkerchief. He called his valet.

"Fetch me," he said, "the coat I wore yesterday evening, but be very sure you do not touch anything it may contain."

The order being obeyed, the king himself searched the pocket of the coat. He found only one handkerchief, and that his own; La Vallière's had disappeared. While busied with all kinds of conjectures and suspicions, a letter was brought to him from La Vallière; it ran in these terms:

"How kind and good of you, my dear Lord, to have sent me those beautiful verses! How full of ingenuity and perseverance your affection is; how is it possible to help loving you so dearly!"

"What does this mean?" thought the king; "there must be some mistake. Look well about," he said to the valet, "for a pocket-handkerchief must be in one of my pockets; and if you do not find it, or if you have touched it —" He reflected for a moment. To make a State matter of the loss of the handkerchief would be to act too

absurdly, and he therefore added, "There was a letter of some importance inside the handkerchief, which had somehow got among the folds of it."

"But, Sire," replied the valet, "your Majesty had only one handkerchief, and that is it."

"True, true," replied the king, setting his teeth hard together. "Oh, poverty, how I envy you! Happy is the man who can empty his own pockets of letters and handkerchiefs!"

He read La Vallière's letter over again, endeavoring to imagine in what conceivable way his verses could have reached their destination. There was a postscript to the letter: —

"I send you back by your messenger this reply, so unworthy of what you sent me."

"Good! I shall find out something now," he said, delightedly. "Who is waiting, and who brought me this letter?"

"M. Malicorne," replied the valet, timidly.

"Let him enter."

Malicorne entered.

"You come from Mademoiselle de la Vallière?" said the king, with a sigh.

"Yes, Sire."

"And you took Mademoiselle de la Vallière something from me?"

"I, Sire?"

"Yes, you."

"Oh, no, Sire."

"Mademoiselle de la Vallière says so distinctly."

"Oh, Sire, Mademoiselle de la Vallière is mistaken."

The king frowned. "What jest is this?" he said; "explain yourself! Why does Mademoiselle de la Vallière

call you my messenger? What did you take to that lady? Speak, Monsieur, and quickly!"

"Sire, I merely took Mademoiselle de la Vallière a pocket-handkerchief; that was all."

"A handkerchief, — what handkerchief?"

"Sire, at the very moment when I had the misfortune to stumble against your Majesty's person yesterday, — a misfortune which I shall deplore to the last day of my life, especially after the displeasure which you exhibited, — I remained, Sire, motionless with despair, your Majesty being at too great a distance to hear my excuses, when I saw something white lying on the ground."

"Ah!" said the king.

"I stooped down, — it was a pocket-handkerchief. For a moment I had an idea that when I stumbled against your Majesty I must have caused the handkerchief to fall from your pocket; but as I felt it all over very respectfully, I perceived a cipher at one of the corners, and on looking at it closely I found that it was Mademoiselle de la Vallière's cipher. I presumed that on coming thither that young lady had let her handkerchief fall, and I accordingly hastened to restore it to her as she was leaving; and that is all I gave to Mademoiselle de la Vallière, I entreat your Majesty to believe." Malicorne's manner was so simple, so full of contrition, and marked with such extreme humility, that the king was greatly amused in listening to him. He was as pleased with him for what he had done as if he had rendered him the greatest service.

"This is the second fortunate meeting I have had with you, Monsieur," he said; "you may count upon my friendship."

The plain and sober truth is that Malicorne had picked the king's pocket of the handkerchief as dexterously as

any of the pickpockets of the good city of Paris could have done. Madame never knew of this little incident; but Montalais gave La Vallière some idea of the manner in which it had really happened, and La Vallière afterwards told the king, who laughed exceedingly at it, and pronounced Malicorne to be a first-rate politician. Louis XIV. was right, and it is well known that he was tolerably acquainted with human nature.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

WHICH TREATS OF GARDENERS, OF LADDERS, AND MAIDS OF HONOR.

Miracles, unfortunately, could not always last forever, while Madame's ill-humor still continued to last. In a week's time matters had reached such a point that the king could no longer look at La Vallière without a look full of suspicion crossing his own. Whenever a promenade was proposed, Madame, in order to avoid the recurrence of scenes similar to that of the thunderstorm or the royal oak, had a variety of indispositions ready prepared; and, thanks to them, she was unable to go out, and her maids of honor remained indoors. There was not the slightest chance or means of paying a nocturnal visit; for in this respect the king had on the very first occasion experienced a severe check, which happened in the following manner. As at Fontainebleau, he had taken De Saint-Aignan with him one evening, when he wished to pay La Vallière a visit; but he had found no one but Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, who had begun to call out "Fire!" and "Thieves!" in such a manner that a perfect legion of chambermaids, attendants, and pages ran to her assistance; so that De Saint-Aignan, who had remained behind in order to save the honor of his royal master, who had fled precipitately, had incurred a severe scolding from the queen-mother as well as from Madame herself. In addition, he had the next morning received two challenges from the De Mortemart family, and the king had been obliged to interfere. This mistake had been owing to the

fact that Madame had suddenly ordered a change in the apartments of her maids of honor, and directed La Vallière and Montalais to sleep in her own boudoir.

Nothing, therefore, was now possible, not even any communication by letter, to write under the eyes of so ferocious an Argus as Madame, whose kindness of disposition was so uncertain, was to run the risk of exposure to the greatest dangers; and it can well be conceived into what a state of continuous irritation and of ever-increasing anger all these petty annoyances threw the young king. He almost tormented himself to death in endeavoring to discover a means of communication; and as he did not unbosom himself to either Malicorne or D'Artagnan, the means were not discovered. Malicorne had, indeed, some occasional brilliant flashes of imagination with which he tried to inspire the king with confidence; but whether from shame or suspicion, the king, who had at first begun to nibble at the bait, soon abandoned the hook. In this way, for instance, one evening, while the king was crossing the garden and looking sadly up at Madame's windows, Malicorne stumbled over a ladder lying beside a border of box, and said to Manicamp, who was walking with him behind the king, and who had not either stumbled over or seen anything, "Did you not see that I just now stumbled against a ladder, and was nearly thrown down?"

"No," said Manicamp, absent-minded as usual; "but it appears that you did not fall."

"That does n't matter; but it is not, on that account, the less dangerous to leave ladders lying about in that manner."

"True, one might hurt himself, especially when absent-minded."

"It is not that; I mean to say that it is dangerous to

allow ladders to lie about like that under the windows of the maids of honor."

Louis started imperceptibly.

"Why so?" inquired Manicamp.

"Speak louder!" whispered Malicorne, as he touched him with his arm.

"Why so?" said Manicamp, louder.

The king listened.

"Because, for instance," said Malicorne, "a ladder nineteen feet high is just the height of the cornice of those windows."

Manicamp, instead of answering, was dreaming of something else.

"Ask me, can't you, what windows I mean," whispered Malicorne.

"But to what windows are you referring?" asked Manicamp, aloud.

"The windows of Madame's apartments."

"Eh!"

"Oh! I don't say that any one would ever venture to climb up into Madame's room; but in Madame's boudoir, separated by a partition, sleep two exceedingly pretty girls, Mesdemoiselles de la Vallière and de Montalais."

"By a mere partition?" said Manicamp.

"Look! you see how brilliantly lighted Madame's apartments are? Well, do you see those two windows?"

"Yes."

"And that window close to the others, but less brightly lighted?"

"Certainly."

"Well, that is the room of the maids of honor. Look! the weather is warm; there is Mademoiselle de la Vallière now, opening the window. Ah, how many soft things could an enterprising lover say to her, if he only suspected

that there was lying here a ladder nineteen feet long, which would just reach the cornice!"

"But she is not alone; you said that Mademoiselle de Montalais is with her."

"Mademoiselle de Montalais counts for nothing; she is her oldest friend, and exceedingly devoted to her, — a positive well, into which can be thrown all sorts of secrets of which one might wish to get rid."

The king had not lost a single syllable of this conversation. Malicorne had even remarked that his Majesty had slackened his pace, in order to give him time to finish. So, when he arrived at the door, he dismissed every one, with the exception of Malicorne, — a circumstance which excited no surprise, for it was known that the king was in love, and they suspected he was going to compose some verses by moonlight; and although there was no moon that evening, the king might nevertheless have some verses to compose. Every one took his leave; and then the king turned towards Malicorne, who respectfully waited until his Majesty should address him.

"What were you saying just now about a ladder, M. Malicorne?" he asked.

"Did I say anything about ladders, Sire?" said Malicorne, gazing into space as if in search of his words which had flown away.

"Yes, of a ladder nineteen feet long."

"Oh, yes, Sire, I remember; but I spoke to M. de Manicamp, and I should not have said a word had I known your Majesty could have heard us."

"And why would you not have said a word?"

"Because I should not have liked to get the gardener scolded who had left it there, — poor fellow!"

"Don't make yourself uneasy on that account! What is this ladder like?"

"If your Majesty wishes to see it, nothing is easier, for there it is."

"In that box-hedge?"

"Exactly."

"Show it to me."

Malicorne turned back and led the king up to the ladder, saying, "Here it is, Sire."

"Pull it this way a little."

When Malicorne had brought the ladder on to the walk, the king began to step its whole length. "Hum!" he said; "you say it is nineteen feet long?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Nineteen feet, — that is rather long; I hardly believe it can be so long as that."

"You cannot judge very correctly with the ladder in that position, Sire. If it were upright, against a tree or a wall for instance, you would be better able to judge, because the comparison would assist you a good deal."

"Oh, it does not matter, M. Malicorne; but I can hardly believe that the ladder is nineteen feet high."

"I know how accurate your Majesty's eye is, and yet I would wager." The king shook his head. "There is one infallible means of verifying it," said Malicorne.

"What is that?"

"Every one knows, Sire, that the lower story of the palace is eighteen feet high."

"True, that is very well known."

"Well, Sire, if I place the ladder against the wall, we shall be able to ascertain."

"True."

Malicorne took up the ladder like a feather, and placed it upright against the wall. And in order to try the experiment, he chose — or chance, perhaps, directed him to choose — the very window of the boudoir where La Val-

lière was. The ladder just reached the edge of the cornice, that is to say, almost to the sill of the window; so that by standing upon the last round but one of the ladder a man of about the middle height, as the king was for instance, could easily hold communication with those who might be in the room. As soon as the ladder had been properly placed, the king, dropping the assumed part he had been playing in the comedy, began to ascend the rounds of the ladder, which Malicorne held at the bottom. But hardly had he completed half of his aerial journey, when a patrol of Swiss Guards appeared in the garden, and advanced straight towards the ladder. The king descended with the utmost precipitation, and concealed himself among the trees.

Malicorne perceived that he must offer himself as a sacrifice; for if he too were to conceal himself, the Guard would search everywhere until they had found either himself or the king, perhaps both. It would be far better, therefore, that he alone should be discovered. Consequently Malicorne hid himself so clumsily that he was the only one arrested. As soon as he was arrested, Malicorne was taken to the guard-house; when there, he declared who he was, and was immediately recognized. In the mean time, by concealing himself first behind one clump of trees and then behind another, the king reached the side-door of his apartments, very much humiliated and still more disappointed. More than that, the noise made in arresting Malicorne had drawn La Vallière and Montalais to their window; and even Madame herself had appeared at her own, with a pair of wax candles, asking what was the matter.

Meanwhile Malicorne sent for D'Artagnan, who did not lose a moment in hurrying to him. But it was in vain that he attempted to make him understand his reasons,

and in vain also that D'Artagnan did understand them; and, further, it was equally in vain that both their sharp and inventive minds endeavored to give another turn to the adventure. There was no other resource left for Malicorne but to let it be supposed that he had wished to enter Mademoiselle de Montalais's apartment, as M. de Saint-Aignan had passed for having wished to force Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente's door. Madame was inflexible; in the first place, because if M. Malicorne had in fact wished to enter her apartment at night through the window and by the means of the ladder, in order to see Montalais, it was a punishable offence on Malicorne's part, and he must be punished accordingly; and in the second place, if Malicorne, instead of acting in his own name, had acted as an intermediary between La Vallière and a person whom she did not wish to mention, his crime was even greater, since love, which is an excuse for everything, did not exist in that case as an excuse for him. Madame therefore made the greatest possible disturbance about the matter, and obtained his dismissal from Monsieur's household, without reflecting, poor blind creature! that both Malicorne and Montalais held her fast in their clutches in consequence of her visit to M. de Guiche, and in a variety of other ways equally delicate. Montalais, who was perfectly furious, wished to revenge herself immediately; but Malicorne pointed out to her that the king's countenance was worth all the disgraces in the world, and that it was a great thing to have to suffer on his Majesty's account.

Malicorne was perfectly right, and therefore, although Montalais was a woman, nay, even had the spirit of ten women in her, he succeeded in bringing her round to his own opinion. And we must not omit to state that the king helped them to console themselves; for in the first

place he presented Malicorne with fifty thousand livres as a compensation for the post he had lost, and in the next place he gave him an appointment in his own household, delighted to have an opportunity of revenging himself in such a manner upon Madame for all she had made him and La Vallière suffer. But as he no longer had Malicorne to steal his pocket-handkerchiefs and to measure ladders for him, the poor lover was destitute. There seemed to be no hope of ever getting near La Vallière again, so long as she should remain at the Palais-Royal. All the dignities and all the money in the world could not remedy that. Fortunately, however, Malicorne was on the look-out, and he succeeded in meeting Montalais, who on her part, it must be admitted, did her best to meet Malicorne.

"What do you do during the night in Madame's apartment?" Malicorne asked the young girl.

"Why, at night I go to sleep," she replied.

"But it is very wrong to sleep; it is unseemly for a girl who is suffering as you are to sleep."

"And from what am I suffering, may I ask?"

"Are you not in despair at my absence?"

"Of course not, since you have received fifty thousand livres and an appointment in the king's household."

"Never mind! You are exceedingly afflicted at not seeing me as you used to see me formerly, and more than all, you are in despair at my having lost Madame's confidence; come now, is not that true?"

"Perfectly true."

"Very good; your distress of mind prevents you from sleeping at night, and so you sob and sigh, and blow your nose ten times every minute as loud as possible."

"But, my dear Malicorne, Madame cannot endure the slightest noise near her."

"I know that perfectly well, — of course she can't endure anything; and so, I tell you, she will not lose a minute, when she sees your deep distress, in turning you out of her room."

"I understand."

"It is very fortunate that you do."

"Well, and what will happen next?"

"The next thing that will happen will be that La Vallière, finding herself alone without you, will break the stillness of the night with such groans and such loud lamentations that she will exhibit despair enough for two."

"In that case she will be put into another room."

"Yes; but which?"

"Which? You seem to be puzzled, Mr. Inventor-General."

"Not at all; wherever and whatever the room may be, it will always be preferable to Madame's own room."

"That is true."

"Well, begin your lamentations a little to-night."

"I certainly will not fail to do so."

"And give La Vallière a hint also."

"Oh, never fear! She cries quite enough already to herself."

"Very well, all she has to do is to cry out loudly."

And they separated.

CHAPTER XL.

WHICH TREATS OF CARPENTRY OPERATIONS, AND FURNISHES DETAILS UPON THE MODE OF CONSTRUCTING STAIRCASES.

THE advice which had been given to Montalais was communicated by her to La Vallière, who saw that it was wanting in wisdom, but who after a certain amount of resistance, arising rather from timidity than from indifference to the project, resolved to put it into execution. This story of the two girls weeping, and filling Madame's bedroom with sounds of lamentation, was Malicorne's *chef-d'œuvre*. As nothing is so probable as improbability, so natural as romance, this Arabian Nights tale succeeded perfectly with Madame. First she sent away Montalais; and then three days, or rather three nights, afterwards, she had La Vallière removed. To the latter she gave one of the small rooms on the top story, situated immediately over the apartments allotted to the gentlemen.

One story only — that is to say, a mere flooring — separated the maids of honor from the officers and gentlemen of her husband's household. A private staircase, which was placed under Madame de Navailles's surveillance, was the only means of communication. For greater safety, Madame de Navailles, who had heard of his Majesty's previous attempts, had the windows of the rooms and the openings of the chimneys carefully barred. There was, therefore, every possible security provided for Mademoiselle de la Vallière, whose room bore more resemblance to a cage than to anything else. When Mademoiselle de la

Vallière was in her own room, — and she was there very frequently, for Madame scarcely ever had any occasion for her services when once she knew she was safe under Madame de Navailles's inspection, — Mademoiselle de la Valhère had no other means of amusing herself than that of looking through the bars of her window.

It happened, therefore, that one morning, as she was looking out as usual, she perceived Malicorne at one of the windows exactly opposite to her own. He held a carpenter's rule in his hand, was surveying the buildings, and seemed to be calculating some algebraic formulas on paper. He somewhat resembled those engineers who, hidden in a trench, get the elevation of the angles of a bastion or take the height of the walls of a fortress. La Vallière recognized Malicorne, and bowed to him; Malicorne, in his turn, replied by a profound bow, and disappeared from the window. She was surprised at this marked coolness, so inconsistent with his unfailing good humor; but she remembered that the poor fellow had lost his appointment on her account, and that he could hardly be very amiably disposed towards her, since in all probability she would never be in a position to make him any recompense for what he had lost. She knew how to forgive offences, and with still greater reason could she sympathize with misfortune. La Vallière would have asked Montalais her opinion if she had been there; but she was absent, it being the hour she usually devoted to her own correspondence. Suddenly La Vallière observed an object, thrown from the window at which Malicorne had appeared, pass across the open space, enter her room through the iron bars, and roll upon the floor. She advanced with no little curiosity towards this object, and picked it up; it was one of those spools upon which silk is wound, only in this instance instead of silk a small piece of paper was

wrapped round it. La Vallière unrolled it and read the following: —

MADEMOISELLE, — I am exceedingly anxious to learn two things: the first is whether the flooring of your apartment is of wood or brick; the second, at what distance from the window your bed is placed. Forgive my importunity, and will you be good enough to send me an answer by the same way by which you receive this letter, — that is to say, by means of the spool; only, instead of throwing it into my room, as I have thrown it into yours, which will be too difficult for you to attempt, have the goodness merely to let it fall.

Believe me, Mademoiselle, your most humble and most respectful servant, MALICORNE.

Write the reply, if you please, upon the letter itself.

"Ah, poor fellow!" exclaimed La Vallière, "he must have gone out of his mind;" and she directed towards her correspondent, of whom she caught but a faint glimpse in the darkness of his room, a look full of kind compassion.

Malicorne understood her, and shook his head as if to reply to her, "No, no, I am not out of my mind; be quite satisfied."

La Vallière smiled as if still in doubt.

"No, no," Malicorne signified by a gesture, "my head is all right;" and he pointed to his head. Then, after moving his hand like a man who writes very rapidly, he put his hands together as if entreating her to write.

La Vallière, even if he were mad, saw no impropriety in doing what Malicorne requested her. She took a pencil and wrote, "Wood;" and then counted ten paces from her window to her bed, and wrote, "ten paces;" and having done this she looked out again at Malicorne, who bowed to her, signifying that he was about to descend. La Vallière understood that it was to pick up the spool

She approached the window, and in accordance with Malicorne's instructions, let it fall. The winder was still rolling along the flag-stones as Malicorne started after it, overtook and picked it up, began to peel it as a monkey would a nut, and ran straight towards the abode of M. de Saint-Aignan.

De Saint-Aignan had taken care that his rooms should be as near the king as possible, as certain plants seek the sun's rays in order to develop themselves more luxuriantly. His apartment consisted of two rooms in that portion of the palace occupied by Louis XIV. himself. M. de Saint-Aignan was very proud of this proximity, which afforded easy access to his Majesty, and more than that, the favor of occasional unexpected meetings. At the moment to which we are now referring he was engaged in having both his rooms magnificently carpeted, with the expectation of receiving the honor of frequent visits from the king; for his Majesty, since his passion for La Vallière, had chosen De Saint-Aignan as his confidant, and could not do without him either night or day. Malicorne introduced himself to the count, and met with no difficulties, because he had been favorably noticed by the king, and the credit which one man may happen to enjoy is always a bait for others.

De Saint-Aignan asked his visitor if he were the fortunate possessor of any news.

"Yes, great news," replied the latter.

"Ah!" said De Saint-Aignan, inquisitive like all favorites; "what is it?"

"Mademoiselle de la Vallière has changed her quarters."

"What do you mean?" said De Saint-Aignan, opening his eyes very wide. "She was living in the same apartments with Madame."

"Precisely so; but Madame got tired of her proximity,

and has installed her in a room which is situated exactly above your future apartment."

"What! up there!" exclaimed De Saint-Aignan, with surprise, and pointing at the floor above him with his finger.

"No," said Malicorne, "yonder," — indicating the building opposite.

"What do you mean, then, by saying that her room is above my apartment?"

"Because I am sure that your apartment ought most naturally to be under La Vallière's room."

De Saint-Aignan, at this remark, gave poor Malicorne a look similar to one of those La Vallière had already given him a quarter of an hour before, that is to say, he thought Malicorne had lost his senses

"Monsieur," said Malicorne to him, "I ask leave to answer your thoughts."

"What! my thoughts?"

"Certainly; you have not clearly understood, it seems to me, what I meant to convey."

"I admit that."

"Well, then, you are aware that underneath the apartments set apart for Madame's maids of honor the gentlemen in attendance on the king and on Monsieur are lodged."

"Yes, I know that, since Manicamp, De Wardes, and others are living there."

"Precisely. Well, Monsieur, observe the singularity of the circumstance; the two rooms destined for M. de Guiche are exactly the very two rooms situated underneath those which Mademoiselle de Montalais and Mademoiselle de la Vallière occupy."

"Well; what then?"

"What then, do you say? Why, these two rooms are empty, since M. de Guiche is now lying wounded at Fontainebleau."

"I assure you, my dear Monsieur, I cannot guess your meaning."

"Well! if I had the happiness to call myself De Saint-Aignan, I should guess immediately."

"And what would you do, then?"

"I should at once change the rooms I am occupying here, for those which M. de Guiche is not using yonder."

"Can you suppose such a thing?" said De Saint-Aignan, disdainfully. "What! abandon the chief post of honor, the proximity to the king, — a privilege conceded only to princes of the blood, to dukes and peers! Permit me to tell you, my dear M. de Malicorne, that you must be out of your senses."

"Monsieur," replied the young man, seriously, "you commit two mistakes. My name is Malicorne, simply; and I am in perfect possession of all my senses." Then, drawing a paper from his pocket, he said, "Listen to what I am going to say; and afterwards, I will show you this paper."

"I am listening," said De Saint-Aignan.

"You know that Madame watches over La Vallière as carefully as Argus watched over the nymph Io."

"I do."

"You know that the king has sought for an opportunity, but in vain, of speaking to the fair prisoner, and that neither you nor myself have yet succeeded in procuring him this piece of good fortune."

"You certainly ought to know something on that subject, my poor Malicorne."

"Very good; what do you suppose would happen to the man whose imagination devised some means of bringing the two lovers together?"

"Oh, the king would have no bounds to his gratitude!"

"M. de Saint-Aignan, would you not be desirous to taste a little of this royal gratitude?"

"Certainly," replied De Saint-Aignan, "any favor from my master, when I may have done my duty, can only be most precious to me."

"In that case look at this paper, Monsieur the Count."

"What is it, — a plan?"

"Yes; a plan of M. de Guiche's two rooms, which in all probability will soon be your two rooms."

"Oh, no, whatever may happen!"

"Why so?"

"Because my own rooms are the envy of too many gentlemen, to whom I certainly shall not give them up, — M. de Roquelaure, for instance, M. de la Ferté, and M. Dangeau."

"In that case I shall leave you, Monsieur the Count, and I shall go and offer to one of those gentlemen the plan I have just shown you, together with the advantages annexed to it."

"But why do you not keep them for yourself?" inquired De Saint-Aignan, suspiciously.

"Because the king would never do me the honor of paying me a visit openly, while he would readily go and see any one of those gentlemen."

"What! the king would go and see any one of those gentlemen?"

"Go! most certainly would he, ten times instead of once. Is it possible you can ask me if the king would go to an apartment which would bring him nearer to Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"Admirably near her, with a whole floor between them!"

Malicorne unfolded the piece of paper, which had been wrapped round the bobbin. "Monsieur the Count," he said, "pray observe that the flooring of Mademoiselle de la Vallière's room is merely a wooden flooring."

"Well?"

"Well! you will get hold of a journeyman carpenter, lock him up in your apartment without letting him know where you have taken him, and let him make a hole in your ceiling, and consequently in Mademoiselle de la Vallière's floor."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed De Saint-Aignan, as if dazzled.

"What is the matter?" said Malicorne.

"I say that you have hit upon a singularly bold idea, Monsieur."

"It will seem a very trifling one to the king, I assure you."

"Lovers never think of the risk they run."

"What danger do you apprehend, Monsieur the Count?"

"Why, effecting such an opening as that will make a terrible noise; it will be heard throughout the entire palace."

"Oh, Monsieur the Count, I am quite sure that the carpenter I shall select will not make the slightest noise. He will saw an opening six feet square, with a saw muffled with tow; and no one, not even those in the immediate vicinity, will know that he is at work."

"My dear M. Malicorne, you astound, you positively bewilder me."

"To continue," replied Malicorne, quietly, "in the room the ceiling of which you have cut through you will put up a staircase, which will either allow Mademoiselle de la Vallière to descend into your room, or the king to ascend into Mademoiselle de la Vallière's room."

"But the staircase will be seen."

"No; for in your room it will be hidden by a partition, over which you will throw a tapestry similar to that which

adorns the rest of the apartment. And in Mademoiselle de la Vallière's room it will not be seen; for the trap-door, which will be a part of the flooring itself, will be made to open under the bed."

"Of course," said De Saint-Aignan, whose eyes began to sparkle with delight.

"And now, Monsieur the Count, there is no occasion to make you admit that the king will frequently come to the room where such a staircase may be constructed. I think that M. Dangeau particularly will be struck by my idea, and I shall now go and explain it to him."

"But, my dear M. Malicorne," cried De Saint-Aignan, "you forget that you spoke to me about it first, and that I have, consequently, the right of priority."

"Do you wish for the preference, then?"

"Do I wish it? I should think so!"

"The fact is, M. de Saint-Aignan, I am presenting you with that which is as good as the promise of an additional step in the peerage, and perhaps even a good estate to accompany your dukedom."

"At least," replied De Saint-Aignan, reddening with pleasure, "it will give me an opportunity of showing the king that he is not mistaken in occasionally calling me his friend, — an opportunity, dear M. Malicorne, for which I shall be indebted to you."

"And which you will not forget to remember?" inquired Malicorne, smiling.

"Nothing will delight me more, Monsieur,"

"But I am not the king's friend, Monsieur; I am simply his attendant."

"Yes; and if you imagine that that staircase is as good as a dukedom for myself, I think there will certainly be letters of nobility for you."

Malicorne bowed.

"All I have to do now," said De Saint-Aignan, "is to move as soon as possible."

"I do not think that the king will object to it; ask his permission, however."

"I will go and see him this very moment."

"And I will run and get the carpenter of whom I was speaking."

"When shall I have him?"

"This very evening."

"Do not forget your precautions."

"He shall be brought with his eyes bandaged."

"And I will send you one of my carriages."

"Without arms."

"With one of my servants without livery, — is it agreed?"

"Very well, Monsieur the Count"

"But stay! What will La Vallière say if she sees what is going on?"

"Oh! I can assure you that she will be very much interested in the operation; and I am equally sure that if the king has not courage enough to ascend to her room, she will have sufficient curiosity to come down."

"We will live in hope," said De Saint-Aignan; "and now I am off to his Majesty. At what time this evening will my carpenter begin?"

"At eight o'clock."

"How long do you suppose he will take to make this opening?"

"About two hours; only afterwards he must have sufficient time to effect what may be called the junction between the two rooms. One night and a portion of the following day will do; we must not reckon upon less than two days, including putting up the staircase."

"Two days! That is very long"

"Nay; when one undertakes to open a door into paradise itself, we must at least take care that it is properly done."

"Quite right; so farewell for a short time, dear M. Malicorne. I shall begin to remove the day after to-morrow, in the evening."

CHAPTER XLI.

THE RIDE BY TORCHLIGHT.

De Saint-Aignan, delighted with what he had just heard, and elated by his expectations, bent his steps towards De Guiche's two rooms. He who a quarter of an hour previous would not have yielded up his own rooms for a million livres, was now ready to pay a million, if it were necessary, for the two rooms he now coveted. But he did not meet with so many obstacles. M. de Guiche did not yet know where he was to lodge, and, besides, was still suffering too much to trouble himself about his lodgings; and so De Saint-Aignan obtained De Guiche's two rooms without difficulty. M. Dangeau, on the other hand, obtained De Saint-Aignan's two rooms, paying to the count's steward a bonus of six thousand livres, and thought he had the best of the bargain. Dangeau's two rooms were to be De Guiche's future abode. This was all; we do not affirm very positively that, in the general moving about, those were the two rooms which De Guiche did occupy. As for M. Dangeau, he was so immeasurably delighted that he did not even give himself the trouble to think whether De Saint-Aignan had any particular reason for removing.

Within an hour after De Saint-Aignan's new resolution, he was in possession of the two rooms; and ten minutes later Malicorne entered, followed by the upholsterers. During this time the king asked for De Saint-Aignan; the valet ran to his late apartments and found Dangeau there; Dangeau sent him on to De Guiche's, and De

Saint-Aignan was at last found; but a little delay had of course taken place, and the king had already exhibited once or twice evident signs of impatience, when De Saint-Aignan entered his royal master's presence, quite out of breath. "You, too, abandon me, then," said Louis XIV., in a tone of lamentation similar to that with which Cæsar eighteen hundred years previous had spoken the *Tu quoque*.

"Sire," said De Saint-Aignan, "I am not abandoning your Majesty, quite the contrary; only, I am busily occupied in changing my lodgings."

"What do you mean? I thought that you had finished moving three days ago."

"Yes, Sire; but I don't find myself comfortable where I am, and so I am going to change to the opposite side of the building."

"Was I not right when I said that you were abandoning me?" exclaimed the king. "Oh, this exceeds all endurance! But so it is. There was only one woman for whom my heart cared at all, and all my family is leagued together to tear her from me. I had a friend to whom I confided my distress, and who helped me to bear up under it, and now he has become wearied of my complaints, and is going to leave me without even asking my permission."

De Saint-Aignan began to laugh.

The king at once guessed that there must be some mystery in this want of respect. "What is it?" cried he, full of hope.

"This, Sire, — that the friend whom the king calumniates is going to try to restore to his sovereign the happiness he has lost."

"Are you going to enable me to see La Vallière?" said Louis XIV.

"I cannot say positively, Sire, but I hope so."

"How?—how? Tell me that, De Saint-Aignan! I wish to know what your project is, and to help you with all my power."

"Sire," replied De Saint-Aignan, "I cannot, even myself, tell very well how I must set about attaining success; but I have every reason to believe that from to morrow —"

"To-morrow, do you say? What happiness! But why are you changing your rooms?"

"In order to serve your Majesty to greater advantage"

"And how can your moving serve me?"

"Do you happen to know where the two rooms destined for the Comte de Guiche are situated?"

"Yes."

"Well, your Majesty now knows where I am going"

"Very likely, but that does not help me"

"What! is it possible that you do not understand, Sire, that above these lodgings are two rooms, one of which is Mademoiselle de Montalais's, and the other —"

"La Vallière's, is it not so, De Saint-Aignan? Oh, yes, yes! It is a brilliant idea, De Saint-Aignan, a true friend's idea, a poet's idea, — in bringing me nearer her when the whole world separates me from her. You are far more to me than Pylades was to Orestes, or Patroclus to Achilles."

"Sire," said De Saint-Aignan, with a smile, "I question whether, if your Majesty were to know my projects to their full extent, you would continue to confer such pompous qualifications upon me. Ah, Sire, I know how very different are the epithets which certain Puritans of the court will not fail to apply to me when they learn what I intend to do for your Majesty."

"De Saint-Aignan, I am dying from impatience; I am

in a perfect fever, I shall never be able to wait until to-morrow To-morrow! why, to-morrow is an eternity!"

"And yet, Sire, I shall require you, if you please, to go out presently and divert your impatience by a little excursion"

"With you, — agreed! We will talk about your projects; we will talk of her."

"Nay, Sire; I remain here."

"With whom shall I go out, then?"

"With the ladies."

"Nothing shall induce me to do that, De Saint-Aignan."

"Sire, you *must* do it"

"No, no, — a thousand times, no! I will never again expose myself to the horrible torture of being close to her, of seeing her, of touching her dress as I pass by her, and yet of not being able to say a word to her. No, I renounce an ordeal which you suppose to be happiness, but which is a torture that consumes and eats away my very life, — to see her in the presence of strangers and not to tell her that I love her, when my whole being reveals my affection and betrays me to every one! No, I have sworn never to do it again, and I will keep my oath."

"Yet, Sire, pray listen to me for a moment."

"I will listen to nothing, De Saint-Aignan."

"In that case I will continue. It is most urgent, Sire, — pray understand me, it is of the greatest importance, — that Madame and her maids of honor should be absent for two hours from the palace."

"I cannot understand your meaning at all, De Saint-Aignan."

"It is hard for me to give directions to my king, but in this circumstance I do give you directions, Sire; and a hunt or a drive is essential to my purposes."

"But this hunt, this drive, would be a caprice, a mere

whim. In displaying such an impatient humor I show my whole court that I have no control over my own feelings. Do not people already say that I dream of conquering the world, but that I ought to begin by conquering myself?"

"Those who say so, Sire, are insolent and factious persons; but whoever they may be, if your Majesty prefers to listen to them, I have nothing further to say. In that case what we have appointed for to-morrow must be postponed indefinitely."

"Nay, De Saint-Aignan, I will go out this evening, — I will go by torchlight to sleep at St. Germain; I will breakfast there to-morrow, and will return to Paris by three o'clock. Will that do?"

"Admirably."

"Then I will set out this evening at eight o'clock."

"Your Majesty has hit the exact minute."

"And you positively will tell me nothing more?"

"It is because I have nothing more to tell you. Industry goes for something in this world, Sire; but yet Chance plays so important a part in it that I have been accustomed to leave her the narrowest part, confident that she will manage so as always to take the widest."

"Well, I abandon myself entirely to you."

"And you are quite right."

Comforted in this manner, the king went immediately to Madame, to whom he announced the intended expedition. Madame fancied from the very first moment that she saw in this unexpectedly arranged party a plot of the king to gain an interview with La Vallière, either on the road, under cover of the darkness, or in some other way; but she took especial care to reveal none of her thoughts to her brother-in-law, and accepted the invitation with a smile upon her lips. She gave directions aloud that her maids

of honor should accompany her, secretly intending in the evening to take the most effectual steps to interfere with his Majesty's attachment. Then, when she was alone, and at the very moment when the poor lover, who had issued his orders for the departure, was revelling in the idea that Mademoiselle de la Vallière would form one of the party, — at the very moment, perhaps, when he was luxuriating in the sad happiness which persecuted lovers enjoy of realizing by the sense of sight alone all the delights of an interdicted possession, — at that very moment, we say, Madame, who was surrounded by her maids of honor, said, "Two ladies will be enough for me this evening, — Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente and Mademoiselle de Montalais."

La Vallière had anticipated the blow, and thus was prepared for it; but persecution had rendered her courageous, and she did not give Madame the pleasure of seeing on her face the impression of the shock her heart had received. On the contrary, smiling with that ineffable gentleness which gave an angelic expression to her features, "In that case, Madame, I shall be at liberty this evening, I suppose," she said.

"Of course."

"I shall profit by that to progress with that piece of tapestry which your Highness has been good enough to notice, and which I have already had the honor of offering to you." And having made a respectful obeisance, she withdrew to her own room; Mesdemoiselles de Tonnay-Charente and de Montalais did the same.

The report of the intended expedition went with them from Madame's chamber, and was soon spread all over the palace. Ten minutes afterwards Malicorne learned Madame's resolution, and slipped under Montalais's door a note in the following terms: —

"L. V. must pass the night with Madame."

Montalais, in pursuance of the compact she had entered into, began by burning the paper, and then sat down to reflect. Montalais was a girl full of expedients, and so had very soon arranged her plan. Towards five o'clock, which was the hour for her to repair to Madame's apartment, she was running across the courtyard, and on arriving within a dozen paces of a group of officers, she uttered a cry, fell gracefully on one knee, rose again, and walked on limping. The gentlemen ran forward to her assistance. Montalais had sprained her foot. Faithful to the discharge of her duty, she insisted, however, upon going up to Madame's apartment.

"What is the matter, and why do you limp so?" the latter inquired; "I mistook you for La Vallière."

Montalais related how it had happened, — that in hurrying on, in order to arrive as quickly as possible, she had sprained her foot. Madame seemed to pity her, and wished to have a surgeon sent for immediately; but she, assuring her that there was nothing really serious in the accident, said, "My only regret, Madame, is that it will preclude my attendance on you; and I should have begged Mademoiselle de la Vallière to take my place with your royal Highness —" Seeing that Madame frowned, she added, "But I have not done so."

"And why did you not do so?" inquired Madame.

"Because poor La Vallière seemed so happy to have her liberty for a whole evening and night too, that I did not feel courageous enough to ask her to take my place."

"What! is she so delighted as that?" inquired Madame, struck by these words.

"She is wild with delight; she, who is always so melancholy, was singing like a bird. Besides, your Highness knows that she detests going out, and also that her character has a spice of wildness in it."

"Oh!" thought Madame, "this extreme delight hardly seems natural to me."

"She has already made all her preparations," continued Montalais, "for dining in her own room *tête-à-tête* with one of her favorite books. And then, as your Highness has six other young ladies who would be delighted to accompany you, I did not make my proposal to Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

Madame did not say a word in reply.

"Have I acted properly?" continued Montalais, with a slight fluttering of the heart, seeing the ill-success that attended the *ruse de guerre* which she had relied upon with so much confidence that she had not thought it even necessary to try to find another. "Does Madame approve of what I have done?" she continued.

Madame was reflecting that the king could very easily leave St. Germain during the night, and that as it was only four leagues and a half from Paris to St. Germain, he might very easily be in Paris in an hour's time. "Tell me," she said, "whether La Vallière, when she heard of your accident, offered at least to bear you company."

"Oh! she does not yet know of my accident; but even did she know of it, I should most certainly not ask her to do anything which might interfere with her own plans. I think she wishes this evening to realize quietly by herself that amusement of the late king, when he said to M. de Cinq-Mars, 'Let us amuse ourselves by doing nothing and making ourselves miserable.'"

Madame felt convinced that some mysterious love-adventure was hidden beneath this strong desire for solitude. This mystery might possibly be Louis's return during the night; it could not be doubted any longer, — La Vallière had been informed of his intended return, and that was the reason of her delight at having to remain behind

at the Palais-Royal. It was all a plan, and arranged beforehand.

"I will not be their dupe, though," said Madame; and she took a decisive step. "Mademoiselle de Montalais," she said, "will you have the goodness to inform your friend, Mademoiselle de la Vallière, that I am exceedingly sorry to disarrange her projects of solitude, but that instead of making herself miserable alone in her own room, as she wished, she will be good enough to accompany us to St. Germain and make herself miserable there."

"Ah! poor La Vallière!" said Montalais, compassionately, but with her heart throbbing with delight. "Oh, Madame, could there not be some means —"

"Enough!" said Madame, "I desire it! I prefer Mademoiselle la Baume le Blanc's society to that of any one else. Go and send her to me, and take care of your foot."

Montalais did not wait for the order to be repeated; she returned to her room, wrote an answer to Malicorne, and slipped it under the carpet The answer simply said: "She will go." A Spartan could not have written more laconically.

"By this arrangement," thought Madame, "I can watch her narrowly on the road; she will sleep near me during the night, and his Majesty must be very clever if he can exchange a single word with Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

La Vallière received the order to set off with the same gentle indifference with which she had received the order to remain. But inwardly her delight was extreme, and she looked upon this change in the princess's resolution as a consolation which Providence had sent her. With less penetration than Madame possessed, she attributed all to chance.

While all, with the exception of those in disgrace, of those who were ill, and of those who were suffering from

sprains, were proceeding towards St. Germain, Malicorne brought his workman to the palace in one of M. de Saint-Aignan's carriages, and led him into the room under La Vallière's. The man set to work, allured by the splendid reward which had been promised him. As the very best tools and implements had been selected from the stock belonging to the engineers attached to the king's household, — and among others a saw with such invincible teeth that it could, under water even, cut through oaken joists as hard as iron, — the work advanced rapidly; and a square portion of the ceiling, taken from between two of the joists, fell into the arms of De Saint-Aignan, Malicorne, the workman, and a confidential valet, — the latter being a person brought into the world to see and hear everything, but to repeat nothing.

In accordance with a new plan indicated by Malicorne, the opening was effected in an angle of the room, and for this reason, — as there was no dressing-closet adjoining La Vallière's room, she had solicited, and had that very morning obtained, a large screen intended to serve as a partition. The screen which had been conceded was quite sufficient to conceal the opening, which would besides be hidden by all the artifices which cabinet-makers have at their command. The opening having been made, the workman slipped himself between the joists, and found himself in La Vallière's room. When there, he cut a square opening in the floor, and out of the boards he manufactured a trap fitting so accurately into the opening that the most practised eye could hardly detect the unavoidable interstices where it joined the floor. Malicorne had provided for everything: a ring and a couple of hinges, which had been bought for the purpose, were affixed to the trap-door; and a small circular staircase had been bought ready-made by the industrious Malicorne, who had paid

two thousand livres for it. It was higher than was required; but the carpenter reduced the number of steps and it was found to fit exactly. This staircase, destined to receive so illustrious a weight, was merely fastened to the wall by a couple of iron clamps; and its base was fixed into the floor of the count's room by two iron pegs screwed down so tightly that the king and his whole council might have passed up and down the staircase without any fear. Every blow of the hammer fell upon a thick pad or cushion, and the saw was not used until the handle had been wrapped in wool, and the blade steeped in oil. The noisiest part of the work, moreover, had taken place during the night and early in the morning, — that is to say, when La Vallière and Madame were both absent.

When, about two o'clock in the afternoon, the court returned to the Palais-Royal, La Vallière went up into her room. Everything was in its place; and not the smallest particle of sawdust, not the smallest chip, was left to bear witness to the violation of her domicile. De Saint-Aignan, however, who had wished to aid all he possibly could in the work, had torn his fingers and his shirt too, and had expended no ordinary quantity of perspiration in his king's service. The palms of his hands, especially, were covered with blisters, occasioned by his having held the ladder for Malicorne. He had moreover brought, one by one, the five pieces of the staircase, each consisting of two steps. In fact, we can safely assert that if the king had seen him so ardently at work, his Majesty would have sworn eternal gratitude towards him. As Malicorne, that man of accurate judgment, had anticipated, the workman had completely finished the job in twenty-four hours; he received twenty-four louis, and left overwhelmed with delight, for that was as much as he would ordinarily have

earned in six months. No one had the slightest suspicion of what had taken place in the room under Mademoiselle de la Vallière's apartment. But in the evening of the second day, at the very moment La Vallière had just left Madame's circle and had returned to her own room, she heard a slight creaking sound at the end of the chamber. Astonished, she looked to see whence it proceeded; and the noise began again. "Who is there?" she said, in a tone of alarm.

"I," replied the well-known voice of the king.

"You! you!" cried the young girl, who for a moment fancied herself under the influence of a dream. "But where? You, Sire?"

"Here," replied the king, opening one of the folds of the screen, and appearing like a ghost at the end of the room.

La Vallière uttered a loud cry, and fell trembling into an arm-chair, as the king advanced respectfully towards her.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE APPARITION.

La Vallière very soon recovered from her surprise; for owing to his respectful bearing, the king inspired her with more confidence by his presence than his sudden appearance had deprived her of. But as he noticed that what made La Vallière most uneasy was the mystery of his entrance into her room, he explained to her the system of the staircase concealed by the screen, and especially denied being a supernatural appearance.

"Oh, Sire!" said La Vallière, shaking her fair head with a most engaging smile, "present or absent, you do not appear to my mind more at one time than at another."

"Which means, Louise — "

"Oh! what you know so well, Sire, — that there is not one moment in which the poor girl whose secret you surprised at Fontainebleau, and whom you came to snatch from the foot of the cross itself, does not think of you."

"Louise, you overwhelm me with joy and happiness."

La Vallière smiled mournfully, and continued: "But, Sire, have you reflected that your ingenious invention could not be of the slightest service to us?"

"Why so? Tell me. I am waiting most anxiously!"

"Because this room in which I abide is liable to be visited at any moment of the day. Madame herself may by chance come here; my companions run in at any moment they please. To fasten the door on the inside would

be to denounce myself as plainly as if I had written over it, 'No admittance; the king is here.' Even now, Sire, at this very moment there is nothing to prevent the door from opening, and your Majesty from being seen here."

"In that case," said the king, laughingly, "I should indeed be taken for a phantom, for no one can tell in what way I came here. Now, it is only phantoms who can pass through walls or ceilings."

"Oh, Sire, what an adventure! Reflect for a moment how terrible the scandal would be! Nothing equal to it has ever been said about the maids of honor, poor creatures! — whom evil report, however, hardly ever spares."

"And your conclusion from all this, my dear Louise — come, explain yourself!"

"Alas! forgive me, it is a hard thing to say, — but your Majesty must suppress staircase, plots, and surprises; for the evil consequences which would result from your being found here, believe me, Sire, would be far greater than our happiness in seeing each other."

"Well, dear Louise," replied the king, tenderly, "instead of removing this staircase by which I have ascended, there is a far more simple means, of which you have not thought."

"A means, — another means?"

"Yes, another. Oh, you do not love me as I love you, Louise, since my invention is quicker than yours."

She looked at the king, who held out his hand to her, which she took and gently pressed between her own.

"You were saying," continued the king, "that I shall be detected coming here, where any one who pleases can enter."

"Stay, Sire; at this very moment, even while you are speaking about it, I tremble with dread of your being discovered."

"But you would not be found out, Louise, if you were to descend that staircase and go to the rooms underneath."

"Oh, Sire! what do you say?" cried La Vallière, in alarm.

"You do not quite understand me, Louise, since you take such great offence at my very first word; first of all, do you know to whom the apartments underneath belong?"

"Why, to M. le Comte de Guiche, Sire."

"Not at all; they are M. de Saint-Aignan's."

"Truly?" cried La Vallière; and this exclamation which escaped from the young girl's joyous heart made the king's heart throb with delight.

"Yes, to De Saint-Aignan, our friend," he said.

"But, Sire," returned La Vallière, "I cannot visit M. de Saint-Aignan's rooms any more than I could M. le Comte de Guiche's. It is impossible, — impossible."

"And yet, Louise, I should think that under the safeguard of the king you could venture anything."

"Under the safeguard of the king?" she said, with a look full of tenderness.

"You have faith in my word, I hope."

"Yes, Sire, when you are not present; but when you are present, when you speak to me, when I look upon you, I have faith in nothing."

"What do you need to reassure you?"

"It is scarcely respectful, I know, to doubt the king thus; but to me you are not the king."

"Thank Heaven! I, at least, hope so most fervently; you see how anxiously I am trying to find an expedient. Stay! would the presence of a third person reassure you?"

"The presence of M. de Saint-Aignan would, certainly"

"Really, Louise, you wound my heart by your suspicions."

Louise did not answer. She merely looked steadfastly at him with that clear, piercing gaze which penetrates the very heart, and said softly to herself, "Alas, alas! it is not you of whom I am afraid, — it is not you upon whom my doubts would fall."

"Well," said the king, sighing, "I agree; and M. de Saint-Aignan, who enjoys the inestimable privilege of reassuring you, shall always be present at our conversations, I promise you."

"Really and truly, Sire?"

"Upon my honor as a gentleman; and you, on your side — "

"Oh, wait, Sire! that is not all yet."

"Still something else, Louise?"

"Oh, certainly! do not go so fast, for we are not yet at the end, Sire."

"Well, finish by rending my heart!"

"You perfectly well understand, Sire, that such conversations ought at least to have a reasonable motive of some kind for M. de Saint-Aignan."

"A reasonable motive," returned the king, in a tone of tender reproach.

"Certainly, Sire. Consider!"

"Dear Louise, every shade of delicacy of feeling is yours, and my only wish is to equal you on that point. It shall be just as you wish; therefore our conversation shall have a reasonable subject, and I have already hit upon one; so that from to-morrow, if you like — "

"To-morrow?"

"Do you mean to say that that is not soon enough?" exclaimed the king, caressing La Vallière's throbbing hand between his own.

At this moment the sound of steps was heard in the corridor.

"Sire, Sire!" cried La Vallière, "some one is coming; do you hear? Oh, fly, fly, I implore you!"

The king made but one bound from his chair to conceal himself behind the screen. It was time, for as he drew one of the folds before him, the handle of the door was turned, and Montalais appeared at the threshold. As a matter of course, she entered quite naturally and without any ceremony, for she well knew, the slyboots, that to knock discreetly at the door beforehand would be showing a suspicion towards La Vallière which would be displeasing to her. She accordingly entered, and after a rapid glance around, which showed her two chairs very close to each other, she was so long in shutting the door, which seemed unaccountably difficult to close, that the king had ample time to raise the trap-door, and to descend again to De Saint-Aignan's room.

A noise imperceptible to any ear less acute than hers warned Montalais of the disappearance of the king; she then succeeded in closing the rebellious door, and approached La Vallière.

"Louise," she said to her, "I want to talk to you, and seriously, too, if you will permit."

Louise, agitated as she was, heard not without secret alarm this word *seriously*, upon which Montalais had purposely laid stress. "Good heavens! my dear Aure," she murmured, "what is the matter now?"

"The matter is, my dear friend, that Madame suspects everything."

"Everything of what?"

"Is there any occasion for us to enter into explanations, and do you not understand what I mean? Come, you must have noticed the fluctuations in Madame's humor

during several days past; you must have noticed how she first kept you close beside her, then dismissed you, and then sent for you again."

"It is indeed strange, but I am used to her caprices."

"Wait a moment! You noticed also that Madame, after having excluded you from the excursion yesterday, sent you her orders to take part in it."

"Yes, I did notice it, of course."

"Well, it seems that Madame has now succeeded in obtaining sufficient information; for she has now gone straight to the point, as there is nothing further left in France to withstand the torrent which sweeps away all obstacles before it, — you know what I mean by the torrent?"

La Vallière hid her face in her hands.

"I mean," continued Montalais, pitilessly, "that torrent which has burst through the gates of the Carmelites of Chaillot, and overthrown all the prejudices of the court, as well at Fontainebleau as at Paris."

"Alas, alas!" murmured La Vallière, her face still covered by her hands, and her tears streaming through her fingers.

"Oh, don't distress yourself in that manner, for you have only heard half of your troubles."

"In Heaven's name," exclaimed the young girl, in great anxiety, "what is the matter, now?"

"Well, then, this is how the matter stands. Madame, who can no longer rely upon any further assistance in France, — for she has, one after the other, made use of the two queens, of Monsieur, and the whole court too, — now bethinks herself of a certain person who has certain pretended rights over you."

La Vallière became white as a waxen figure.

"This person," continued Montalais, "is not in Paris at this moment, but, if I am not mistaken, is in England."

"Yes, yes," breathed La Vallière, almost crushed with the weight of her anguish.

"And this person is to be found, I think, at the Court of Charles II.; am I right?"

"Yes."

"Well, this evening a letter has been despatched by Madame to St. James's, with directions for the courier to go straight on to Hampton Court, which it seems is one of the royal residences, situated about a dozen miles from London."

"Yes; well?"

"Well, as Madame writes regularly to London once a fortnight, and as the usual courier left for London not more than three days ago, I have been thinking that some serious circumstance could alone have induced her to take up her pen again so soon, for you know Madame is a very indolent correspondent."

"Oh, yes!"

"This letter has been written, therefore, — something tells me so, at least, — on your account."

"On my account?" repeated the unhappy girl, mechanically.

"And I, who saw the letter lying on Madame's desk before she sealed it, fancied I could read —"

"What did you fancy you could read?"

"I might possibly have been mistaken, though —"

"Tell me, — what was it?"

"The name of Bragelonne."

La Vallière rose, a prey to the most painful agitation. "Montalais," she said, her voice broken by sobs, "all the smiling dreams of youth and innocence have fled already.

I have nothing now to conceal, either from you or from any one else. My life is exposed to every one's inspection, and can be opened like a book, in which all the world can read, from the king himself to the first passer-by. Aure, dearest Aure, what can I do!—what will become of me?"

Montalais approached close to her, and said, "Consult your own heart, of course."

"Well, I do not love M. de Bragelonne. When I say I do not love him, understand that I love him as the most affectionate sister could love the best of brothers; but that is not what he requires, nor what I have promised him."

"In fact, you love the king," said Montalais, "and that is a sufficiently good excuse."

"Yes, I do love the king," hoarsely murmured the young girl, "and I have paid dearly enough for the right to pronounce those words. And now, Montalais, tell me,—what can you do, either for me or against me, in my present position?"

"You must speak more clearly still."

"What am I to say, then?"

"And so you have nothing very particular to tell me?"

"No!" said Louise, in astonishment.

"Very good; and so all you have to ask me is my advice respecting M. Raoul?"

"Nothing else."

"It is a very delicate subject," replied Montalais.

"No, it is nothing of the kind. Ought I to marry him in order to keep the promise I made, or ought I to continue to listen to the king?"

"You have really placed me in a very difficult position," said Montalais, smiling. "You ask me if you ought to marry Raoul, whose friend I am, and whom I shall mor-

tally offend in giving my opinion against him; and then, you ask me if you should cease to listen to the king,—the king whose subject I am, and whom I should also offend if I were to advise you in a particular way. Ah, Louise, Louise, you seem to hold a difficult position at a very cheap rate."

"You have not understood me, Aure," said La Vallière, wounded by the slightly mocking tone which Montalais had assumed. "If I speak of marrying M. de Bragelonne, it is because I can marry him without causing him any dissatisfaction; on the other hand, if I listen to the king, he becomes the usurper of a possession of only moderate worth, indeed, but to which love lends a certain appearance of value. What I ask you, then, is to tell me some means of disengaging myself honorably either from the one or from the other, or rather, I ask you from which side you think I can free myself most honorably."

"My dear Louise," replied Montalais, after a pause, "I am not one of those seven wise men of Greece, and I have no invariable rules of conduct; but on the other hand I have a little experience, and I can assure you that no woman ever asks for such advice as you are now asking without being in a terrible state of embarrassment. Now, you have made a solemn promise, which every principle of honor would require you to fulfil; if therefore you are embarrassed in consequence of having undertaken such an engagement, it is not a stranger's advice (every one is a stranger to a heart full of love),—it is not my advice, I repeat, which will extricate you from your embarrassment. I shall not give it to you, therefore; and for a greater reason still,—because, were I in your place, I should feel much more embarrassed after the advice than before it. All I can do is to repeat what I have already said,—do you wish for my assistance?"

"Yes, yes."

"Very well; that is all. Tell me in what way you wish me to help you, — tell me for and against whom; in this way we shall not make any blunders."

"But, first of all," said La Vallière, pressing her companion's hand, "for whom or against whom do you declare yourself?"

"For you, if you are really and truly my friend."

"Are you not Madame's confidante?"

"I shall be the more useful to you. If I were not to know what is going on in that direction, I should not be able to aid you, and consequently you would not derive any advantage from my acquaintance. Friendships live and thrive upon reciprocal benefits."

"In short, then, you will remain at the same time Madame's friend also?"

"Evidently. Do you complain of that?"

"No," said La Vallière, thoughtfully; for that cynical frankness appeared to her an offence addressed both to the woman and to the friend.

"All well and good, then," said Montalais, "for in that case you would be very foolish."

"You will serve me, then?"

"Devotedly so, especially if you will serve me in return."

"One would almost say that you did not know my heart," said La Vallière, looking at Montalais with her eyes wide open in astonishment.

"Why, the fact is that since we have belonged to the court, my dear Louise, we are very much changed."

"In what way?"

"It is very simple. Were you the second Queen of France yonder, at Blois?"

La Vallière hung down her head, and began to weep.

Montalais looked at her with an indescribable expression, and murmured, "Poor girl!" and then, adding, "Poor king!" she kissed Louise on the forehead, and returned to her apartment, where Malicorne was waiting for her.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE PORTRAIT.

In that malady which is termed love the paroxysms succeed one another at intervals, always more rapid from the moment when the disease declares itself. Later, the paroxysms are less frequent in proportion as the cure approaches. This being laid down as an axiom in general, and as the beginning of a chapter in particular, we will now proceed with our recital. The next day, the day fixed by the king for the first conversation in De Saint-Aignan's room, La Vallière, on opening one of the folds of the screen, found upon the floor a note in the king's handwriting. This note had been passed through the opening in the floor from the lower apartment to her own. No indiscreet hand or curious gaze was concerned in the bringing of this simple paper. This was one of Malicorne's ideas. Having seen how very serviceable De Saint-Aignan would become to the king on account of the situation of his apartment, he did not wish that the courtier should become still more indispensable as a messenger, and so he had, on his own private authority, reserved this last post for himself.

La Vallière most eagerly read the letter, which fixed two o'clock that same afternoon for the rendezvous, and which indicated the way of raising the trap-door in the flooring. "Make yourself look as beautiful as possible," added the postscript of the letter, — words which astonished the young girl, but at the same time reassured her.

The hours passed away very slowly, but the time fixed arrived at last. As punctual as the priestess Hero, Louise lifted up the trap-door at the last stroke of the hour of two, and found the king upon the upper steps, waiting for her with the greatest respect, in order to give her his hand to descend. This delicacy and deference affected her very powerfully. At the foot of the staircase the two lovers found the count, who with a smile and a low reverence distinguished by the best taste expressed his thanks to La Vallière for the honor she conferred upon him. Then, turning towards the king, he said, 'Sire, our man is here."

La Vallière looked at the king with some uneasiness.

"Mademoiselle," said the king, "if I have begged you to do me the honor of coming down here, it was from an interested motive. I have procured a most admirable portrait-painter, who is celebrated for the fidelity of his likenesses, and I wish you to be kind enough to authorize him to paint yours. Besides, if you positively wish it, the portrait shall remain in your own possession."

La Vallière blushed.

"You see," said the king to her, "we shall not be three only; we shall be four. And so long as we are not alone, there can be as many present as you please."

La Vallière gently pressed her royal lover's hand.

"Let us pass into the next room, if your Majesty pleases," said De Saint-Aignan, opening the door to let his guests precede him.

The king walked behind La Vallière, fixing his eyes lingeringly and passionately upon her neck, as white as snow, upon which her long fair ringlets fell in heavy masses. La Vallière was dressed in a thick silk robe of pearl-gray color, with a tinge of rose, with jet ornaments, which displayed to greater effect the dazzling purity of her skin;

she held in her slender and transparent hands a bouquet of heartsease, Bengal roses, and clematis, surrounded with leaves of the tenderest green, above which uprose, like a tiny goblet shedding perfumes, a Haarlem tulip of gray and violet tints, of a pure and beautiful species, which had cost the gardener five years' toil in combinations and the king five thousand livres. Louis had placed this bouquet in La Vallière's hand as he saluted her.

In the room the door of which De Saint-Aignan had just opened, a young man with beautiful black eyes and long brown hair was standing, dressed in a loose velvet coat. It was the painter; his canvas was quite ready, and his palette prepared for use. He bowed to Mademoiselle de la Vallière with the grave curiosity of an artist who is studying his model, saluted the king discreetly, as if he did not recognize him, and as he would have saluted any other gentleman. Then, leading Mademoiselle de la Vallière to the seat which he had arranged for her, he begged her to sit down. The young girl assumed an attitude graceful and unconstrained, her hands occupied, and her limbs reclining on cushions, and in order that her gaze might not assume a vague or affected expression, the painter begged her to choose some kind of occupation, so as to engage her attention. Whereupon Louis XIV., smiling, sat down on the cushions at the feet of his mistress; so that she, in the reclining posture she had assumed, leaning back in the arm-chair, holding her flowers in her hand, and he, with his eyes raised towards hers and fixed devouringly on her face, together formed so charming a group that the artist contemplated it with professional delight, while on his side De Saint-Aignan regarded them with feelings of envy.

The painter sketched rapidly; and very soon beneath the touches of the brush there started into life, out of the

gray background, the gentle, poetry-breathing face, with its soft calm eyes and delicately tinted cheeks, framed in the fair hair. The lovers, however, spoke but little, and looked at each other a good deal; sometimes their eyes became so languishing in their gaze that the painter was obliged to interrupt his work in order to avoid representing an Erycina instead of a La Vallière. It was on such occasions that De Saint-Aignan came to the rescue, and recited verses, or repeated one of those little tales related by Patru and written so cleverly by Tallemant des Réaux. Sometimes La Vallière was fatigued, and a recess was taken; and immediately a tray of precious porcelain laden with the most beautiful fruits which could be obtained, and rich wines distilling their bright colors in chased silver, served as accessories to the picture, of which the painter could trace but the most ephemeral resemblance.

Louis was intoxicated with love, La Vallière with happiness, De Saint-Aignan with ambition; and the painter was storing up recollections for his old age. Two hours passed away in this manner; and four o'clock having struck, La Vallière rose and made a sign to the king. Louis also rose, approached the picture, and addressed a few flattering remarks to the artist. De Saint-Aignan extolled the picture, which, as he pretended, was already beginning to assume an accurate resemblance. La Vallière, in her turn, blushingly thanked the painter, and passed into the next room, where the king followed her after having previously summoned De Saint-Aignan.

"Will you not come to-morrow?" he said to La Vallière.

"Oh, Sire, pray consider that some one will be sure to come to my room, and will not find me there."

"Well!"

"What will become of me in that case?"

"You are very apprehensive, Louise."

"But suppose Madame were to send for me."

"Oh!" replied the king, "will the day never come when you yourself will tell me to brave everything, so that I may not have to leave you again?"

"On that day, then, Sire, I shall be quite out of my mind, and you ought not to believe me."

"To-morrow, Louise."

La Vallière sighed; but without the strength to oppose her royal lover's wish, she repeated, "To-morrow, then, since you desire it, Sire;" and with these words she ran up the stairs lightly, and disappeared from her lover's gaze.

"Well, Sire?" inquired De Saint Aignan, when she had left.

"Well, De Saint-Aignan, yesterday I thought myself the happiest of men."

"And does your Majesty, then," said the count, smiling, "regard yourself to-day as the unhappiest of men?"

"No; but my love for her is an unquenchable thirst. In vain do I drink, in vain do I swallow the drops of water which your industry procures for me; the more I drink, the more I thirst."

"Sire, that is in some degree your own fault, and your Majesty alone has made the position such as it is."

"You are right."

"In that case, therefore, the means to be happy is to fancy yourself satisfied, and to wait."

"Wait! you know that word, then?"

"There, there, Sire, do not despair! I have already made endeavors in your behalf; I will still endeavor."

The king shook his head in a despairing manner.

"What, Sire! have you not been satisfied hitherto?"

"Oh, yes, indeed yes, my dear De Saint-Aignan; but find, for Heaven's sake, some further means yet."

"Sire, I undertake to do my best, and that is all I can do."

The king wished to see the portrait again, as he was unable to see the original. He suggested several alterations to the painter, and took his departure; and then De Saint-Aignan dismissed the artist. The easel, paints, and painter himself had scarcely gone, when Malicorne showed his head at the doorway. He was received by De Saint-Aignan with open arms, but still with a little sadness; for the cloud which had passed across the royal sun veiled, in its turn, the faithful satellite, and Malicorne at the first glance perceived the pall upon De Saint-Aignan's face.

"Oh, Monsieur the Count," he said, "how sad you look!"

"And good reason, too, my dear M. Malicorne. Will you believe that the king is not satisfied?"

"Not satisfied with his staircase?"

"Oh, no; on the contrary, he is delighted with the staircase."

"The decorations of the apartments, I suppose, are not according to his taste."

"Oh, he has not even thought of that! No, indeed; what has dissatisfied the king —"

"I will tell you, Monsieur the Count, — he is dissatisfied at finding himself the fourth person at a rendezvous of this kind. How is it possible, Monsieur the Count, that you could not have guessed that?"

"Why, how could I have guessed that, dear M. Malicorne, when I only followed the king's instructions to the very letter?"

"Did his Majesty really insist upon your being present?"

"Positively."

"And also required that the painter whom I met down stairs just now should be here too?"

"He insisted, M. Malicorne, — he insisted upon it."

"In that case I can easily understand why his Majesty is dissatisfied."

"What! dissatisfied that I have so punctually and literally obeyed his orders? I don't understand you."

Malicorne scratched his ear as he asked, "What time did the king fix for the rendezvous in your apartment?"

"Two o'clock."

"And you were waiting for the king, here?"

"Ever since half-past one; for it would have been a fine thing for me to have been unpunctual with his Majesty."

Malicorne, notwithstanding his respect for De Saint-Aignan, could not resist shrugging his shoulders. "And the painter," he said, — "did the king wish him to be here at two o'clock also?"

"No; but I had him waiting here from mid-day. Far better, you know, for a painter to be kept waiting a couple of hours than the king a single minute."

Malicorne began to laugh to himself. "Come, dear M. Malicorne," said Saint-Aignan, "laugh less at me, and speak a little more freely, I beg."

"Well, then, Monsieur the Count, if you wish the king to be a little better satisfied the next time he comes — "

"*Ventre saint-gris!* as his grandfather used to say; I should say I did wish it!"

"Well, when the king comes to-morrow, go away on a most pressing matter of business, which cannot possibly be postponed, and stay away for twenty minutes."

"What! leave the king alone for twenty minutes?" cried De Saint-Aignan, in alarm.

"Very well, do as you like; don't pay any attention to what I say," said Malicorne, moving towards the door.

"Nay, nay, dear M. Malicorne; on the contrary, go on, — I begin to understand you. But the painter — "

"Oh! the painter must be half an hour late."

"Half an hour, — do you really think so?"

"Yes, I do, decidedly."

"Very well, then, I will do as you tell me."

"And my opinion is that you will find you are doing perfectly right. Will you allow me to come and make a few inquiries to-morrow?"

"Certainly."

"I have the honor to be your most respectful servant, M. de Saint-Aignan," said Malicorne, bowing himself out.

"There is no doubt that fellow has more wit than I have," said De Saint-Aignan, compelled by his conviction.

Hamilton Court.



CHAPTER XLIV.

HAMPTON COURT.

The revelation which Montalais made to La Vallière, in a preceding chapter, of which we have been witnesses, very naturally suggests a return to the principal hero of this tale, — a poor wandering knight, roving about at the king's caprice. If our reader will be good enough to follow us, we will, as he did, cross that strait, more stormy than the Euripus, which separates Calais from Dover; we will speed across that green and fertile country, with its numerous little streams, round about Charing, Maidstone, and many other villages and towns, each more picturesque than the others, and finally arrive at London. Thence, like bloodhounds following a track, after having ascertained that Raoul had made his first stay at Whitehall, his second at St. James's, and having learned that he had been warmly received by Monk, and introduced into the best society of Charles II.'s court, we will follow him to one of Charles II.'s summer residences, near the town of Kingston, at Hampton Court, situated on the Thames.

This river is not yet, at that spot, the proud highway which bears upon its broad bosom its thousands of travellers every day, and whose waters are as black and troubled as those of Cocytus, as it boastfully asserts, "I, too, am the sea." No; at Hampton Court it is a soft and murmuring stream, with moss-grown banks, reflecting in its broad mirror the willows and beeches, on which may occasionally be seen a light boat lying unused among

the tall reeds, in a little bay bordered by alders and forget-me-nots. The surrounding country on all sides seemed smiling in happiness and wealth; the brick cottages, from whose chimneys the blue smoke was slowly ascending, peeped forth from the belts of green holly which environed them; children dressed in red frocks appeared and disappeared amid the high grass, like poppies bowed by the gentle breath of the passing breeze. The fat white sheep ruminated with closed eyes under the shade of the stunted aspens; while far and near the kingfisher, clad in emerald and gold, skimmed swiftly along the surface of the water like a magic ball, heedlessly touching, as he passed, the line of his brother angler, who sat watching in his boat the tench and the shad.

High above this paradise of dark shadows and soft light arose the palace of Hampton Court, built by Wolsey, and made magnificent for a king, — a residence which the haughty cardinal had been obliged, timid courtier that he was, to offer to his master, Henry VIII., who had frowned with envy and cupidity at his first view of the new palace. Hampton Court, with its brick walls, its large windows, its handsome iron gates, as well as its curious bell-turrets, its retired walks, and interior fountains, like those of the Alhambra, was a perfect bower of roses, jasmine, and clematis. It gave joy to every sense, of sight and smell particularly, and formed a most charming frame for the picture of love which Charles II. displayed among the voluptuous paintings of Titian, Pordenone, and Vandyck, — he who had in his gallery the portrait of Charles I., martyr king, and could show upon the wainscoting the holes made by the balls of the Puritan soldiers of Cromwell, on the 24th of August, 1648, at the time they had brought Charles I. prisoner to Hampton Court. There it was that the king, ever intoxicated with pleasure and

amusement, held his court; being a poet in feeling, he thought himself justified in redeeming, by a whole day of voluptuousness, every minute which had been formerly passed in anguish and misery.

It was not the soft greensward of Hampton Court, — so soft that it almost gave the impression of velvet, — nor was it the beds of flowers, with their variegated hues, encircling the foot of every tree, with rose-trees many feet in height, which spread out their wealth of color like sheaves of fireworks, — nor even the enormous lime-trees, whose branches swept the earth like willows, offering a ready concealment for love or reflection beneath the shade of their foliage, — it was none of these things for which Charles II. loved his beautiful palace of Hampton Court. Perhaps it might have been that beautiful sheet of water, which the cool breeze rippled like the wavy undulations of Cleopatra's hair; waters bedecked with cresses and white water-lilies, with hardy bulbs, which half unfold themselves to disclose the golden-colored germs shining in their milk-white covering; murmuring waters, on the bosom of which the black swans majestically floated, and the restless water-fowl, with their tender broods covered with silken down, darted restlessly in every direction, in pursuit of the insects among the flags or the frogs in their mossy retreats. Perhaps it might have been the enormous hollies, with their varied foliage; or the tasteful bridges spanning the canals; or the fawns browsing in the endless avenues of the park; or the numberless birds which hopped and flew about the borders of box and clover.

It might well have been any of these charms, for Hampton Court possessed them all. There were, too, arbors of white roses, which climbed and trailed along the lofty trellises, showering down upon the ground their snowy and fragrant petals; in the park were ancient sycamores,

with mossy trunks, which buried their roots in that luxuriant mould, so rich in romance. But, no; what Charles II. most loved in Hampton Court was the charming figures who when mid-day was passed flitted to and fro along his terraces. Like Louis XIV., he had had their wealth of beauty painted for his gallery by one of the great artists of the period, — an artist who well knew the secret of transferring to canvas a ray of light which had escaped from their beaming eyes laden with love and love's delights.

The day of our arrival at Hampton Court is almost as clear and bright as a summer's day in France; the atmosphere is laden with the delicious perfume of the geraniums, sweet-peas, syringas, and heliotrope which are scattered around in profusion. It is past mid-day; and the king, having dined after his return from hunting, has paid a visit to Lady Castlemaine, the lady who was reputed at the time to be the mistress of his heart; and after this proof of his devotion, he is at leisure to indulge in infidelity to her until evening arrives. Love and amusement ruled the whole court. It was the period when ladies would seriously ask their cavaliers their opinion upon a foot more or less captivating, according to whether it wore a pink or a green silk stocking. It was the period when Charles II. had declared that there was no salvation for a woman without green silk stockings, because Miss Lucy Stewart wore them of that color.

While the king is endeavoring to inspire others with his preferences on this point, we will ourselves bend our steps towards an avenue of beech-trees opposite the terrace, and listen to the conversation of a young girl in a dark-colored dress, who is walking with another of about her own age dressed in lilac and dark blue. They crossed the lawn, in the middle of which arose a beautiful fountain,

with figures of sirens executed in bronze; and, talking as they went, walked along the terrace, from which many brick-paved walks led at intervals to summer-houses in the park, various in form and ornaments. These summer-houses were nearly all occupied; and so the two young women passed on, the one blushing deeply, while the other seemed dreamingly silent. At last, having reached the end of the terrace which looks on the river, and finding there a cool retreat, they sat down close to each other.

"Where are we going, Stewart?" said the younger of the two ladies to her companion.

"My dear Grafton, we are going, you perceive, where you yourself led the way."

"I?"

"Yes, you, — to the extremity of the palace, towards that seat yonder, where the young Frenchman is sitting and sighing."

Miss Mary Grafton stopped short, and said, "No, no; I am not going there."

"Why not?"

"Let us go back, Stewart."

"Nay, on the contrary, let us go on and have an explanation."

"About what?"

"About how it happens that the Vicomte de Bragelonne always accompanies you in all your walks, as you invariably accompany him in his."

"And you conclude either that he loves me or that I love him?"

"Why not? He is a most agreeable gentleman. No one hears me, I hope," said Miss Lucy Stewart, as she turned round with a smile, which indicated, moreover, that her uneasiness on the subject was not extreme.

"No, no," said Mary; "the king is in his oval summer-house with the Duke of Buckingham."

"Oh! speaking of the duke, Mary, it seems he has constituted himself your knight since his return from France; how is your own heart in that direction?"

Mary Grafton shrugged her shoulders with seeming indifference.

"Well, well, I will ask the handsome Bragelonne about that," said Stewart, laughing; "let us go and find him at once."

"What for?"

"I wish to speak to him."

"Not yet; one word before you do. Come, Stewart, you who know so many of the king's little secrets, tell me why is M. de Bragelonne in England, and what is he doing here?"

"What every gentleman does who is sent as an envoy from his sovereign to another."

"That may be; but, seriously, although politics are not our forte, we know enough to be satisfied that M. de Bragelonne has no mission of any serious import here."

"Well, then, listen," said Stewart, with assumed gravity; "for your sake I am going to betray a State secret. Shall I tell you the nature of the letter which King Louis XIV. gave M. de Bragelonne for King Charles II.? I will; here it is: —

"'My Brother, — The bearer of this is a gentleman attached to my court, and the son of one whom you regard most warmly. Treat him kindly, I beg, and try to make him like England.'"

"Did it say that?"

"Word for word, — or something very like it. I will not answer for the form, but the substance I am sure of."

"Well, and what conclusion do you, or rather what conclusion does the king, draw from that?"

"That the King of France has his own reasons for removing M. de Bragelonne, and for getting him married — somewhere else than in France."

"So that in consequence of this letter — "

"King Charles received M. de Bragelonne, as you are aware, in the most distinguished and friendly manner; the handsomest apartments in Whitehall were allotted to him, and as you are the most precious person in his court, inasmuch as you have rejected his heart, — nay, do not blush, — he wished you to take a fancy to this Frenchman, and he was desirous to confer upon him so valuable a prize. And this is the reason why you, the heiress of three hundred thousand pounds, a future duchess, and one so beautiful and so good, have been thrown in M. de Bragelonne's way in all the promenades and parties of pleasure to which he was invited. In fact, it was a plot, a kind of conspiracy. If you wish to further it, I will aid you."

Miss Mary smiled with that charming expression which was habitual to her, and pressing her companion's arm, said, "Thank the king, Lucy."

"Yes, yes; but the Duke of Buckingham is jealous, so take care!"

Hardly had she pronounced these words, when the duke appeared from one of the pavilions on the terrace, and approaching the two girls with a smile said: "You are mistaken, Miss Lucy. I am not jealous; and the proof, Miss Mary, is yonder, — in the person of the Vicomte de Bragelonne himself, who ought to be the cause of my jealousy, but who is dreaming in pensive solitude. Poor fellow! Allow me to surrender to him your delightful society for a few minutes, while I avail myself of those few

minutes to converse with Miss Lucy Stewart, to whom I have something to say." And then, bowing to Lucy, he said, "Will you do me the honor to accept my hand, in order that I may lead you to the king, who is waiting for us?" With these words Buckingham, still smiling, took Miss Stewart's hand and led her away.

When by herself, Mary Grafton, her head gently inclined towards her shoulder with that indolent grace which distinguishes young English girls, remained for a moment with her eyes fixed on Raoul, but as if uncertain what to do. At last, after first blushing violently and then turning deadly pale, thus revealing the internal combat which agitated her heart, she seemed to make up her mind, and with a tolerably firm step advanced towards the seat on which Raoul was sitting, buried in the profoundest meditation, as we have already said. The sound of Miss Mary's steps, light as they were, upon the greensward aroused Raoul; he turned his head, perceived the young girl, and walked forward to meet the companion whom his happy destiny had thrown in his way.

"I have been sent to you, Monsieur," said Mary Grafton; "will you accept me?"

"To whom is my gratitude due for so great a happiness?" replied Raoul.

"To the Duke of Buckingham," replied Mary, affecting a gayety which she did not really feel.

"To the Duke of Buckingham, to him who so passionately seeks your charming society! Am I really to believe that you are serious, Mademoiselle?"

"The fact is, Monsieur, you perceive, that everything seems to conspire to make us pass the best, or rather the longest, part of our days together. Yesterday it was the king who desired me to beg you to seat yourself next to me at dinner; to-day it is the Duke of Buckingham

himself who begs me to come and seat myself near you on this bench."

"And he has gone away in order to leave us together?" asked Raoul, with some embarrassment.

"Look yonder, at the turning of that path; he is just going out of sight with Miss Stewart. Are these polite attentions usual in France, Monsieur the Viscount?"

"I cannot very precisely say what people do in France, Mademoiselle, for I can hardly be called a Frenchman. I have resided in many countries, and almost always as a soldier; and then I have spent a long period of my life in the country. I am almost a savage."

"You are not contented in England, I fear."

"I scarcely know," said Raoul, inattentively, and sighing deeply at the same time.

"What! you do not know?"

"Forgive me," said Raoul, shaking his head and collecting his thoughts, "I did not understand you."

"Oh," said the young girl, sighing in her turn, "how wrong the Duke of Buckingham was to send me here!"

"Wrong!" said Raoul, quickly. "You are right; for I am but a rude, uncouth companion, and my society annoys you. The duke was, indeed, very wrong to send you."

"It is precisely," replied the young lady, in a clear, calm voice, "because your society does not annoy me, that the duke was wrong to send me to you."

It was now Raoul's turn to blush. "But," he resumed, "how happens it that the Duke of Buckingham should send you to me, and why should you have come? The duke loves you, and you love him."

"No," replied Mary, seriously, "the duke does not love me, because he is in love with Madame la Duchesse d'Orléans; and as for myself, I have no affection for the duke."

Raoul looked at the young girl with astonishment.

"Are you a friend of the Duke of Buckingham, Viscount?" she inquired.

"The duke has honored me by calling me so ever since we met in France."

"You are simple acquaintances, then?"

"No; for the duke is the most intimate friend of one whom I regard as a brother."

"M. le Comte de Guiche?"

"Yes, Mademoiselle."

"Who is in love with Madame la Duchesse d'Orléans?"

"Oh! what is that you are saying?"

"And who loves him in return," continued the young girl, quietly.

Raoul bent down his head; and Miss Mary Grafton, sighing deeply, continued: "They are very happy. But leave me, M. de Bragelonne; for the Duke of Buckingham has given you a very troublesome commission in offering me as a companion in your promenade. Your heart is elsewhere, and it is with the greatest difficulty you can be charitable enough to lend me your attention. Confess truly; it would be unfair on your part, Viscount, not to confess it."

"Madame, I do confess it."

She looked at him steadily. He was so noble and so handsome in his bearing, his clear eye revealed so much gentleness, candor, and resolution, that the idea could not possibly enter the mind of a lady so accomplished as Miss Mary, that he was either rudely discourteous or a mere simpleton. She only perceived that he loved another woman, and not herself, with the whole strength of his heart. "Ah! I now understand you," she said; "you have left your heart behind you in France." Raoul bowed. "The duke is aware of your affection?"

"No one knows it," replied Raoul.

"Why, therefore, do you tell me? Nay, answer me."

"I cannot."

"It is for me, then, to anticipate an explanation. You do not wish to tell me anything, because you are now convinced that I do not love the duke; because you see that I possibly might have loved you; because you are a gentleman of noble and delicate sentiments; and because, instead of accepting, even were it for the mere amusement of the passing hour, a hand which was almost pressed upon you, and instead of meeting my smiles with a smiling lip, you, who are young, have preferred to tell me, whom men have called beautiful, 'My heart is far away in France.' For this I thank you, M. de Bragelonne, you are indeed a noble-hearted, noble-minded man, and I regard you yet more for it, — as a friend. And now let us cease speaking of myself, and talk of your own affairs. Forget that I have ever spoken to you of myself; tell me why you are sad, and why you have become more than usually so during the last few days."

Raoul was deeply and sensibly moved by her sweet and melancholy tone; and as he could not at the moment find a word to say, the young girl again came to his assistance.

"Pity me," she said. "My mother was born in France, and I can therefore affirm that I too am French in blood as well as in feeling; but the heavy atmosphere and characteristic gloom of England seem to weigh like a burden upon me. Sometimes my dreams are golden-hued and full of wondrous enjoyment; but suddenly a mist arises and overspreads my dreams and blots them out forever. Such, indeed, is the case at the present moment. Forgive me, I have now said enough on that subject; give me your hand, and relate your griefs to me as to a friend."

"You say you are French in blood and in feeling?"

"Yes; not only, I repeat, was my mother French, but,

further still, as my father, a friend of King Charles I., was exiled in France, I, during the trial of that prince as well as during the Protector's life, was brought up in Paris; at the Restoration of King Charles II. my poor father returned to England, where he died almost immediately afterwards; and then King Charles created me a duchess, and has dowered me according to my rank."

"Have you still any relatives in France?" Raoul inquired with the deepest interest.

"I have a sister there, my senior by seven or eight years, who was married in France, and was early left a widow; her name is Madame de Bellière. Do you know her?" she added, observing Raoul start suddenly.

"I have heard her name mentioned."

"She, too, is in love; and her last letters inform me that she is happy, and her affection is, I conclude, returned. I have told you, M. de Bragelonne, that I share her nature; but I do not share her happiness. But let us now speak of yourself; whom do you love in France?"

"A young girl, as soft and as pure as a lily."

"But if she loves you, why are you sad?"

"I have been told that she has ceased to love me."

"You do not believe it, I trust?"

"He who wrote me so does not sign his letter."

"An anonymous denunciation! some treachery, be assured!" said Miss Grafton.

"Stay!" said Raoul, showing the young girl a letter which he had read a hundred times. She took it from his hand, and read as follows:—

"Viscount,—You are perfectly right to amuse yourself yonder with the lovely faces of Charles II.'s court, for at Louis XIV.'s court the castle in which your affections are enshrined is besieged. Stay in London altogether, poor Viscount, or return without delay to Paris."

"There is no signature," said Miss Mary.

"None."

"Believe it not, then."

"Very good; but here is a second letter, from M. de Guiche, which says, —

"'My Friend, — I am lying here wounded and ill. Return, Raoul, oh, return!'"

"What do you intend to do?" inquired the young girl, with a feeling of oppression at her heart.

"My intention, as soon as I received this letter, was immediately to take my leave of the king."

"When did you receive it?"

"The day before yesterday."

"It is dated from Fontainebleau."

"A singular circumstance, is it not? — for the court is now at Paris. At all events, I would have set off; but when I mentioned my departure to the king, he began to laugh, and said to me: 'How comes it, Monsieur the Ambassador, that you think of leaving? Has your sovereign recalled you?' I colored, naturally enough, for I was confused by the question; for the fact is, the king himself sent me here, and I have received no order to return."

Mary frowned in deep thought, and said, "Do you remain, then?"

"I must, Mademoiselle."

"And does the one whom you love write to you?"

"Never."

"Never, do you say? Does she not love you, then?"

"At least, she has not written to me since my departure, although she used occasionally to write to me before. I trust that she may have been prevented."

"Hush! the duke is here."

Buckingham at that moment was seen at the end of the

walk, approaching towards them, alone and smiling; he advanced slowly, and held out his hands to them both.

"Have you arrived at an understanding?" he said.

"About what?"

"About whatever might render you happy, dear Mary, and make Raoul less miserable."

"I do not understand you, my Lord," said Raoul.

"That is, my view of the subject, Miss Mary; do you wish me to mention it before M. de Bragelonne?" he said with a smile.

"If you mean," replied the young girl, haughtily, "that I was not indisposed to love M. de Bragelonne, that is useless, for I have told him so myself."

Buckingham reflected for a moment, and without seeming in any way discountenanced, as she expected, he said: "My reason for leaving you with M. de Bragelonne was that I thoroughly knew your refined delicacy of feeling, no less than the perfect loyalty of your mind and heart, and I hoped that M. de Bragelonne's wounded heart might be cured by the hands of such a physician."

"But, my Lord, before you spoke of M. de Bragelonne's heart, you spoke to me of your own. Do you mean me to effect the cure of two hearts at the same time?"

"Perfectly true, Miss Mary; but you will do me the justice to admit that I have long discontinued a useless pursuit, acknowledging that my own wound is incurable."

"My Lord," said Mary, collecting herself for a moment before she spoke, "M. de Bragelonne is happy, for he loves and is beloved. He has no need of such a physician as I."

"M. de Bragelonne," said Buckingham, "is on the very eve of experiencing a serious misfortune, and he has greater need than ever of sympathy and affection."

"Explain yourself, my Lord," inquired Raoul, anxiously.

"No. Gradually I will explain myself; but if you de-

sire it, I can tell Miss Mary what you may not listen to yourself."

"My Lord, you are putting me to the torture; you know something that you wish to conceal from me?"

"I know that Miss Mary Grafton is the most charming object that a heart ill at ease could possibly meet with in its way through life."

"My Lord, I have already told you that the Vicomte de Bragelonne loves elsewhere," said the young girl.

"He is wrong, then."

"Do you assume then to know, my Lord, that I am wrong?"

"Yes."

"But who is it that he loves, then?" exclaimed the young girl.

"He loves a woman who is unworthy of him," said Buckingham, with that calm, collected manner of which an Englishman is alone capable.

Miss Mary Grafton uttered a cry, which together with the remark that Buckingham had that moment made spread over De Bragelonne's features a deadly paleness, arising from the sudden shock and also from a vague fear of impending misfortune. "My Lord," he exclaimed, "you have just pronounced words which without a moment's delay I go to seek an explanation of at Paris."

"You will remain here," said Buckingham, "because you have no right to leave; and no one has the right to quit the service of the king for that of any woman, even were she as worthy of being loved as Mary Grafton is."

"You will tell me all, then?"

"I will, on condition that you will remain."

"I will remain, if you will promise to speak openly and without reserve."

Thus far had their conversation proceeded, and Buck-

ingham in all probability was on the point of revealing, not indeed all that had taken place, but at least all that he was aware of, when one of the king's attendants appeared at the end of the terrace, and advanced towards the summer-house where the king was sitting with Miss Lucy Stewart. A courier followed him, covered with dust from head to foot, who seemed as if he had but a few moments before dismounted from his horse.

"The courier from France! Madame's courier!" exclaimed Raoul, recognizing the princess's livery; and while the attendant and the courier advanced towards the king, the duke and Miss Grafton exchanged a look full of intelligence with each other.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE COURIER FROM MADAME.

CHARLES II. was busily engaged in proving, or in endeavoring to prove, to Miss Stewart that she was the only person for whom he cared at all, and consequently he was swearing for her an affection similar to that which his ancestor Henry IV. had entertained for Gabrielle. Unfortunately for Charles II. he had hit upon an unlucky day, — upon a day when Miss Stewart had taken it into her head to make him jealous; and therefore, instead of being touched by his offer, as the king had hoped, she laughed heartily. "Oh, Sire, Sire," she cried, laughing all the while, "if I were to be unfortunate enough to ask you for a proof of the affection you profess, how easy it would be to see that you are telling a falsehood!"

"Nay, listen to me!" said Charles. "You know my cartoons by Raphael; you know whether I care for them or not; the whole world envies me their possession, as you well know also; my father got Vandyck to purchase them. Would you like me to send them to your house this very day?"

"Oh, no!" replied the young girl. "Pray keep them yourself, Sire; my house is far too small to accommodate such visitors."

"In that case you shall have Hampton Court to put the cartoons in."

"Be less generous, Sire, and make your love more lasting; that is all I have to ask you."

"I shall never cease to love you; is not that enough?"

"You are laughing, Sire."

"Do you wish me to weep, then?"

"No; but I should like to see you a little more melancholy."

"Thank Heaven, my dear, I have been so long enough, — fourteen years of exile, poverty, and misery. I think I may regard it as a debt discharged; besides, melancholy makes people look so plain."

"Far from that; for look at the young Frenchman!"

"What! the Vicomte de Bragelonne! Are you smitten too? By Heaven, they will all become mad about him, one after the other, but he, on the contrary, has a reason for being melancholy."

"Why so?"

"Oh, indeed! you wish me to betray State secrets to you?"

"If I wish it, you must do it, since you told me you were quite ready to do everything I wished."

"Well, then, he is bored in his own country. Does that satisfy you?"

"Bored?"

"Yes, — a proof that he is a simpleton, do you understand? I allow him to fall in love with Miss Mary Grafton, and he feels bored!"

"Very good; it seems, then, that if you were to find Miss Lucy Stewart indifferent to you, you would readily console yourself by falling in love with Miss Mary Grafton."

"I don't say that. In the first place, you know that Mary Grafton does not care for me; besides, a man can only console himself for a lost affection by the discovery of a new one. Again, however, I repeat, the question is not of myself, but of that young man. One might almost

be tempted to call the girl he has left behind him a Helen, — a Helen before her introduction to Paris, of course."

"He has left some one, then?"

"That is to say, some one has left him."

"Poor fellow! so much the worse!"

"What do you mean by 'so much the worse'?"

"Why not? Why did he leave?"

"Do you think it was of his own will that he left?"

"Was he obliged to leave, then?"

"He left Paris under orders, my dear Stewart; and — prepare to be surprised — by express orders of the king."

"Ah! I begin to see now."

"At least say nothing at all about it."

"You know very well that I am quite as discreet as any man could be. And so the king sent him away?"

"Yes."

"And during his absence he takes his mistress away from him?"

"Yes; and will you believe it, the silly fellow, instead of thanking the king, is making himself miserable!"

"What! thank the king for depriving him of the woman he loves! Really, Sire, yours is a most ungallant speech."

"But, pray understand me! If she whom the king had run off with were a Miss Grafton or a Miss Stewart, I should be of his opinion; nay, I should even think him not half miserable enough; but she is a little, thin, lame thing. Deuce take such fidelity as that! Surely, one can hardly understand how a man can refuse a girl who is rich for one who is poor, a girl who loves him for one who deceives and betrays him."

"Do you think that Mary seriously wishes to please the viscount, Sire?"

"I do, indeed."

"Very good! the viscount will settle down in England; for Mary has a clear head, and when she fixes her mind upon anything, she does so thoroughly."

"Take care, my dear Miss Stewart! If the viscount has any idea of adopting our country, he has not entertained it long, for it was only the day before yesterday that he came to ask permission to leave."

"Which you refused him, I suppose?"

"I should think so, indeed. My royal brother is far too anxious for his absence; and for myself, my *amour propre* is enlisted on his side, for I will never have it said that I had held out as a bait to this young man the noblest and gentlest creature in England —"

"You are very gallant, Sire," said Miss Stewart, with a pretty pout.

"I do not allude to Miss Stewart," said the king; "for she is a bait for royalty, and since she has captivated me, I trust that no one else will be caught by her. I say, then, in short, that the attention I have shown this young man will not have been thrown away; he will stay with us here, will marry here, or I am very much mistaken."

"And I hope that when he is once married and settled, instead of being angry with your Majesty, he will be grateful to you. For every one tries his utmost to please him; even the Duke of Buckingham, which is hardly credible, keeps in the background in his presence."

"And including Miss Stewart, even, who calls him a most finished gentleman."

"Stay, Sire! You have extolled Miss Grafton quite enough; let me now talk a little of De Bragelonne. But, by the by, Sire, your kindness for some time past astonishes me; you think of those who are absent, you forgive those who have done wrong, — in fact, you are as nearly perfect as possible. How does it happen —"

"It is because you allow yourself to be loved," he said, beginning to laugh.

"Oh, there must be some other reason!"

"Well, I am obliging my brother Louis XIV."

"Nay, I must have another reason."

"Well, then, the true motive is that Buckingham strongly recommended the young man to me, saying, 'Sire, I begin by yielding up, in favor of the Vicomte de Bragelonne, all claim to Miss Grafton; I pray you, follow my example.'"

"The duke is, indeed, a true gentleman."

"Oh, of course, of course! It is Buckingham's turn now, I suppose, to turn your head. You seem determined to cross me in everything to-day."

At this moment some one tapped at the door.

"Who is it that presumes to interrupt us?" exclaimed Charles, impatiently.

"Really, Sire, you are extremely vain with your 'Who is it that presumes?' and in order to punish you for it —"

She went to the door herself and opened it.

"Ah! it is a courier from France," said Miss Stewart.

"A courier from France!" exclaimed Charles; "from my sister, perhaps?"

"Yes, Sire," said the usher, — "a special messenger."

"Let him come in at once," said Charles.

"You have a letter for me," said the king to the courier as he entered, "from Madame la Duchesse d'Orléans?"

"Yes, Sire," replied the courier; "and so urgent is its nature that I have been only twenty-six hours bringing it to your Majesty, and yet I lost three quarters of an hour at Calais."

"Your zeal shall not be forgotten," said the king, as he opened the letter. When he had read it, he burst out

laughing and exclaimed, "Upon my word, I don't understand anything about it." He then read the letter a second time, Miss Stewart assuming a manner marked by the greatest reserve, and doing her utmost to restrain her ardent curiosity.

"Francis," said the king to his valet, "see that this excellent fellow has proper refreshment and sleeps soundly, and that on waking to-morrow morning he finds a purse of fifty sovereigns by his bedside."

"Sire!" said the courier, amazed.

"Begone, begone! My sister was perfectly right in desiring you to use the utmost diligence; the affair was most pressing;" and he again began to laugh louder than ever. The courier, the valet, and Miss Stewart herself hardly knew what sort of countenance to assume. "Ah!" said the king, throwing himself back in his armchair, "when I think that you have ruined how many horses —"

"Two!"

"Two horses to bring this intelligence to me! That will do; you can leave us now."

The courier retired with the valet. Charles went to the window, which he opened, and leaning forward called out, "Duke! Duke of Buckingham! my dear Buckingham, come here!"

The duke hurried to him in obedience to the summons; but when he reached the door and perceived Miss Stewart, he hesitated to enter.

"Come in, and shut the door, Duke!" said the king. The duke obeyed, and perceiving in what an excellent humor the king was, he advanced smilingly towards him. "Well, my dear duke, how do you get on with your Frenchman?"

"Sire, I am in the most utter despair about him."

"Why so?"

"Because charming Miss Grafton is willing to marry him, but he is unwilling."

"Why, this Frenchman is a perfect Bœotian!" cried Miss Stewart. "Let him say either 'Yes' or 'No,' and let the affair end."

"But," said Buckingham, seriously, "you know, or you ought to know, Madame, that M. de Bragelonne is in love in another direction."

"In that case," said the king, coming to the help of Miss Stewart, "nothing is easier; let him say 'No,' then."

"Oh, but I have proved to him that he was wrong not to say 'Yes.'"

"Did you tell him candidly that La Vallière was deceiving him?"

"Yes, without the slightest reserve; and as soon as I had done so he gave a start, as if he were going to clear the Channel at a bound."

"At all events," said Miss Stewart, "he has done something, and that is really very fortunate."

"But," continued Buckingham, "I stopped him. I have left him and Miss Mary in conversation together; and I sincerely trust that now he will not leave, as he seemed to have an idea of doing."

"An idea of leaving England!" exclaimed the king.

"I at one moment hardly thought that any human power was capable of preventing him; but Miss Mary's eyes are now bent fully on him, and he will remain."

"Well, that is the very thing in which you are mistaken, Buckingham," said the king, with a peal of laughter; "the poor fellow is predestined."

"Predestined to what?"

"If it were to be simply deceived, that is nothing; still, to look at him, it is a great deal."

"At a distance, and with Miss Grafton's aid, the blow will be warded off."

"Far from it, far from it! he will have the aid neither of distance nor of Miss Grafton. Bragelonne will set off for Paris in an hour."

Buckingham started, and Miss Stewart opened her eyes very wide in astonishment.

"But, Sire," said the duke, "your Majesty knows that it is impossible."

"That is to say, my dear Buckingham, that it is impossible until it happens."

"Do not forget, Sire, that the young man is a perfect lion, and that his wrath is terrible."

"I don't deny it, my dear Villiers."

"If he sees his misfortune so near, so much the worse for the author of it."

"I don't deny it; but what do you expect me to do?"

"Were it the king himself," cried Buckingham, "I would not answer for him."

"Oh, the king has his Musketeers to take care of him," said Charles, quietly; "I know that perfectly well, for I was kept dancing attendance in his antechamber at Blois. He has M. d'Artagnan, — there is a guardian for you! I should make myself perfectly easy with twenty storms of passion like those of your Bragelonne, if I had four guardians like M. d'Artagnan."

"But I entreat your Majesty, who is so good and kind, to reflect a little," said Buckingham.

"Stay!" said Charles II., presenting the letter to the duke; "read, and answer yourself what you would do in my place."

Buckingham slowly took Madame's letter, and trembling with emotion read the following words: —

For your own sake, for mine, for the honor and safety of every one, send M. de Bragelonne back to France immediately.

Your devoted sister, HENRIETTA.

"Well, Villiers, what do you say?"

"Upon my word, Sire, I have nothing to say," replied the duke, amazed.

"Nay, would you, of all persons," said the king, artfully, "advise me not to listen to my sister when she writes so urgently?"

"Oh, no, no, Sire! and yet — "

"You 've not read the postscript, Villiers; it is under the fold of the letter, and escaped my own eye at first. Read it." And as the duke turned down a fold of the letter, he read, —

"A thousand kind remembrances to those who love me."

The duke's head sank gradually on his breast; the paper trembled in his fingers, as if it had been changed to lead. The king paused for a moment, and seeing that Buckingham did not speak, "He must follow his destiny, as we ours," continued the king. "Every man has his share of suffering in this world; I have had my own, I have had that of others who belong to me, and have thus borne a double cross. But the deuce take all my cares now! Go and bring the gentleman here, Villiers."

The duke opened the trellised door of the summer-house, and pointing to Raoul and Mary, who were walking together side by side, said, "What a cruel blow, Sire, for poor Miss Grafton!"

"Nonsense! call him!" said Charles II., knitting his black brows together. "Every one seems to be sentimental

here. There, look at Miss Stewart, who is wiping her eyes; now deuce take the French fellow!"

The duke called to Raoul; and taking Miss Grafton by the hand, he led her to the king.

"M. de Bragelonne," said Charles II., "did you not ask me the day before yesterday for permission to return to Paris?"

"Yes, Sire," replied Raoul, greatly puzzled by this opening.

"Well, my dear viscount, I refused you, I think?"

"Yes, Sire"

"Were you not angry with me for it?"

"No, Sire; your Majesty had no doubt excellent reasons for withholding it, for you are so wise and so good that everything you do is well done"

"I alleged as a reason, I believe, that the King of France had not recalled you?"

"Yes, Sire, that was the reason you assigned."

"Well, M. de Bragelonne, I have considered the matter since. If the king did not in fact fix your return, he begged me to render your sojourn in England as agreeable as possible; since, however, you ask my permission to return, it is because your residence in England is no longer agreeable to you."

"I do not say that, Sire."

"No; but your request, at least," said the king, "signified that another place of residence would be more agreeable to you than this."

At this moment Raoul turned towards the door, against the frame of which Miss Grafton was leaning, pale and sorrow-stricken; her other arm was passed through the arm of the duke.

"You do not reply," pursued Charles; "the French proverb is pertinent,— 'Who does not speak, consents.'

Very good, M. de Bragelonne, I am now in a position to satisfy you; whenever you please, therefore, you may leave for France. I authorize it."

"Sire!" exclaimed Raoul; while Mary stifled an exclamation of grief which rose to her lips, unconsciously pressing Buckingham's arm.

"You can be at Dover this evening," continued the king; "the tide serves at two o'clock in the morning."

Raoul, astounded, stammered a few words, which equally answered the purpose both of thanks and of excuse.

"I therefore bid you adieu, M. de Bragelonne, and wish you every sort of prosperity," said the king, rising. "You will confer a pleasure on me by keeping this diamond in remembrance of me; I had intended it as a marriage gift."

Miss Grafton seemed ready to faint; and as Raoul received the diamond from the king's hand, he too felt his strength and courage failing him. He addressed a few respectful words to the king, a passing compliment to Miss Stewart, and looked for Buckingham to bid him adieu. The king profited by this moment to disappear. Raoul found the duke engaged in endeavoring to encourage Miss Grafton.

"Tell him to remain, I implore you!" said Buckingham to Mary.

"No; I will tell him to go," replied Miss Grafton, with returning animation. "I am not one of those women who have more pride than heart. If she whom he loves is in France let him return there, and bless me for having advised him to go thither and seek his happiness. If, on the contrary, she shall have ceased to love him, let him come back here again. I shall still love him, and his unhappiness will not have lessened him in my regard. In the arms of my house you will find that which Heaven has

engraven on my heart: *Habenti parum, egenti cuncta,* — 'To the rich is accorded little, to the poor everything,'"

"I do not believe, friend," said Buckingham, "that you will find yonder the equivalent of what you leave behind you here."

"I think, or at least I hope," said Raoul, with a gloomy air, "that she whom I love is worthy of my affection; but if it be true that she is unworthy of me, as you have endeavored to make me believe, I will tear her image from my heart, Duke, even though my heart be broken in the attempt."

Mary Grafton lifted her eyes to him with an expression of ineffable compassion; and Raoul smiled sadly, saying, "Mademoiselle, the diamond which the king has given me was destined for you. Give me leave to offer it for your acceptance. If I marry in France, you will send it back to me; if I do not marry, keep it;" and he bowed and left her.

"What does he mean?" thought Buckingham, while Raoul pressed Miss Mary's icy hand with marked respect.

Mary understood the look that Buckingham fixed upon her. "If it were a wedding-ring, I would not accept it," she said.

"And yet you were willing to ask him to return to you."

"Oh, Duke," cried the young girl, in heart-broken accents, "a woman such as I am is never accepted as a consolation by a man like him."

"You do not think he will return, then?"

"Never," said Miss Grafton, in a choking voice.

"And I grieve to tell you, Mary, that he will find yonder his happiness destroyed, his mistress lost to him, even his honor impaired. What will be left him, then, equal

to your affection? Do you answer, Mary, — you who know yourself so well."

Miss Grafton placed her white hand on Buckingham's arm; and while Raoul was hurrying away with headlong speed down the avenue of lindens, she repeated in dying accents the line from "Romeo and Juliet," —

"I must be gone and live, or stay and die."

As she finished the last word, Raoul had disappeared. Miss Grafton returned to her own apartment, paler and more silent than death itself. Buckingham availed himself of the arrival of the courier who had brought the letter to the king, to write to Madame and to the Comte de Guiche. The king had not been mistaken; for at two in the morning the tide was at full flood, and Raoul had embarked for France.

CHAPTER XLVI.

DE SAINT-AIGNAN FOLLOWS MALICORNE'S ADVICE.

The king followed the progress of La Vallière's portrait with a care and attention arising as much from a desire that it should resemble her as from the wish that the painting of it might be long continued. It was amusing to observe him following the artist's brush, awaiting the completion of a particular plan or the result of a combination of colors, and suggesting various modifications to the painter, which the latter consented to adopt with the most respectful docility. And again when the artist, following Malicorne's advice, was a little late in arriving, and when De Saint-Aignan had been obliged to be absent for a short time, it was interesting to observe, though no one witnessed them, those moments of silence full of deep expression, which united in one sigh two souls most disposed to understand each other, and most desirous of this calm and meditation. Then the minutes flew by as if on wings; and as the king drew closer to Louise and bent his burning gaze upon her, a noise was suddenly heard in the anteroom. It was the artist, who had just arrived; De Saint-Aignan, too, had returned full of apologies; and the king began to talk, and La Vallière to answer him very hurriedly, their eyes revealing to De Saint-Aignan that they had enjoyed a century of happiness during his absence. In a word, Malicorne, a philosopher without knowing it, had learned how to inspire the king with an appetite in

the midst of plenty, and with desire in the assurance of possession.

La Vallière's fears of interruption had never been realized, and no one imagined that she was absent from her apartment two or three hours every day. She pretended that her health was very uncertain. Those who went to her room always knocked before entering; and Malicorne, the man of so many ingenious inventions, had constructed an acoustic piece of mechanism, by means of which La Vallière when in De Saint-Aignan's apartment was always forewarned of any visits which were paid to the room she usually inhabited. In this manner, therefore, without going outside, and having no confidante she was able to return to her apartment, thus removing by her appearance, a little tardy perhaps but no less effectual, the suspicions of the most determined sceptics. Malicorne having asked De Saint Aignan the next morning what news he had to report, the latter had been obliged to confess that the quarter of an hour's liberty had put the king in most excellent humor. "We must double the dose," replied Malicorne, "but imperceptibly so; wait until they seem to wish it."

They were so desirous for it, however, that on the evening of the fourth day, at the moment when the painter was packing up his painting implements during De Saint-Aignan's continued absence, De Saint-Aignan entered, and noticed upon La Vallière's face a shade of disappointment and vexation which she could not conceal. The king was less reserved, and exhibited his annoyance by a very significant shrug of the shoulders, at which La Vallière could not help blushing. "Very good!" thought De Saint-Aignan to himself; "M. Malicorne will be delighted this evening," — as he in fact was, when it was reported to him.

"It is very evident," Malicorne remarked to the count, "that Mademoiselle de la Vallière hoped that you would be at least ten minutes later."

"And the king that I should be half an hour later, dear M. Malicorne."

"You will be but very indifferently devoted to the king," replied the latter, "if you were to refuse his Majesty that half-hour's satisfaction."

"But the painter?" objected De Saint-Aignan.

"I will take care of him," said Malicorne; "only I must study faces and circumstances a little before I act. Those are my magical operations; and while sorcerers are enabled by means of the astrolabe to take the altitude of the sun, moon, and stars, I am satisfied merely by looking into people's faces, in order to see if their eyes are encircled with dark lines and if the mouth describes a convex or a concave arc."

"But be careful!"

"Have no fear."

And the cunning Malicorne had every opportunity of watching narrowly and closely; for the very same evening the king accompanied the queens to Madame's apartments, and made himself so remarked by his serious face and his deep sighs, and looked at La Vallière with such a languishing expression, that Malicorne said to Montalais during the evening, "To-morrow;" and he went off to the painter's house in the Rue des Jardins-St.-Paul to beg him to postpone the next sitting for a couple of days.

De Saint-Aignan was not within when La Vallière, who was now quite familiar with the lower story, lifted up the trap-door and descended. The king, as usual, was waiting for her on the staircase, and held a bouquet in his hand; as soon as he saw her, he clasped her tenderly in

his arms. La Vallière, much moved at the action, looked around the room; but when she saw that the king was alone, she did not complain of it. They sat down. The king, reclining near the cushions on which Louise was seated, with his head supported by her knees, placed there as in an asylum whence no one could banish him, gazed ardently upon her; and as if the moment had arrived when nothing could interpose between their two hearts, she too gazed with similar passion upon him, and from her eyes, so soft and pure, there emanated a flame whose rays went straight to her royal lover's heart, to warm it and then to set it on fire. Transported by contact with the trembling knees, quivering with emotion when the hand of Louise rested on his head, the king restrained his indulgence in that happiness, looking every moment for the return of the painter or of De Saint-Aignan. In that painful expectation he at times strove to escape the subtle allurement which penetrated his veins; he sought to induce a lethargy of heart and sense; he repulsed the reality ripe before him, to pursue its shadow.

But the door remained closed; and neither De Saint-Aignan nor the painter appeared, nor did the hangings even move. A mysterious and voluptuous silence reigned in the room, — a silence which seemed to influence even the birds in their gilded prison. The king, completely overcome, turned his head and buried his burning lips in La Vallière's hands, who lost control over herself and pressed her hands convulsively against her lover's lips.

Louis threw himself upon his knees; and as La Vallière did not move her head, the king's forehead being within reach of her lips, in her ecstasy she touched with a light and furtive kiss the perfumed locks which caressed her cheeks. The king seized her in his arms, and without resistance on her part they exchanged their first

kiss, — that burning kiss which changes love into a delirium.

Neither the painter nor De Saint-Aignan returned that day.

A sort of intoxication, slumbrous and sweet, which refreshed the sense and sent sleep circulating like a gentle poison through the veins, — that sleep ineffable, languorous as a happy life, — fell like a cloud between the past life and the life to come of the two lovers.

In the midst of that sleep full of dreams a continued noise was heard upon the upper floor, which at first disturbed La Vallière, but did not wholly arouse her attention. As the noise, however, continued, as it forced itself upon the attention, and recalled the poor girl from her dreams of happiness to the sad reality of life, she arose in a state of utter bewilderment, though beautiful in her disorder, saying, "Some one is waiting for me above. Louis, Louis, do you not hear?"

"Well, and am I not waiting for you also?" said the king, with infinite tenderness. "Let others henceforth wait for you."

But she gently shook her head, as she replied with tears in her eyes, "Happiness concealed! — power concealed! — my pride should be silent as my heart."

The noise was again resumed.

"I hear Montalais's voice," she said; and she hurried up the staircase. The king followed her, unable to let her leave his sight, and covering her hand with his kisses. "Yes, yes," repeated La Vallière, who had passed halfway through the opening; "yes, it is Montalais who is calling me. Something important must have happened."

"Go, then, dear love," said the king, "and return quickly."

"No, no, not to-day! Adieu, adieu!" she said, as she

stooped down once more to embrace her lover, and then escaped. Montalais was, in fact, waiting for her, very pale and agitated.

"Quick, quick! he is coming!" she said.

"Who? — who is coming?"

"He! I warned you of it."

"But who? You are killing me."

"Raoul," murmured Montalais.

"It is I, — I," said a joyous voice upon the last steps of the grand staircase.

La Vallière uttered a terrible shriek and threw herself back.

"Here I am, dear Louise," said Raoul, running forward. "Oh, I knew too well that you had not ceased to love me!"

La Vallière, with a gesture partly of extreme terror and partly as if invoking a curse, attempted to speak, but could articulate only a single word. "No, no!" she said; and she fell into Montalais's arms, murmuring, "Do not come near me."

Montalais made a sign to Raoul, who stood almost petrified at the door, and did not even attempt to advance another step into the room. Then, looking towards the side of the room where the screen was, she exclaimed, "Imprudent girl! she has not even closed the trap-door." Montalais advanced towards the corner of the room to close, first, the screen, and then, behind the screen, the trap-door. But suddenly the king, who had heard La Vallière's cry, darted through the opening, and hurried forward to her assistance. He threw himself on his knees before her, as he overwhelmed Montalais with questions, who hardly knew where she was.

At the moment, however, that the king fell on his knees, a cry of utter despair rang through the corridor,

accompanied by the sound of retreating footsteps. The king wished to run and see who had uttered the cry, and whose were the footsteps he had heard. It was in vain that Montalais sought to retain him, for the king, leaving La Vallière, hurried towards the door, — too late, however, for Raoul was already at a distance, and the king saw only a kind of shadow turning the angle of the corridor.

CHAPTER XLVII.

TWO OLD FRIENDS.

WHILE every one at court was busy with his own affairs, a man mysteriously took up his post behind the Place de Grève, in the house which we once saw besieged by D'Artagnan on the occasion of a riot. The principal entrance of this house was in the Place Baudoyer. The house was tolerably large, surrounded by gardens, enclosed in the Rue St. Jean by the shops of tool-makers, which protected it from prying looks; and was walled in by a triple rampart of stone, noise, and verdure, like an embalmed mummy in its triple coffin.

The man to whom we have just alluded walked along with a firm step, although he was no longer in his early prime. His dark cloak and long sword outlined beneath the cloak plainly revealed a man seeking adventures; and judging from his curling mustaches, his fine and smooth skin, as seen under his *sombrero*, the gallantry of his adventures was unquestionable. In fact, hardly had the cavalier entered the house, when the clock of St. Gervais struck eight; and ten minutes afterwards a lady, followed by an armed servant, approached and knocked at the same door, which an old woman immediately opened for her. The lady raised her veil as she entered; though no longer beautiful or young, she was still active, and of an imposing carriage. She concealed, beneath a rich toilet of exquisite taste, an age which Ninon de l'Enclos alone could have smiled at with impunity. Hardly had she

reached the vestibule, when the cavalier, whose features we have only roughly sketched, advanced towards her, holding out his hand.

"Good-day, my dear duchess," he said

"How do you do, my dear Aramis?" replied the duchess.

He led her to an elegantly furnished apartment, on whose high windows were reflected the expiring rays of the setting sun, which filtered through the dark crests of some adjoining firs. They sat down side by side. Neither of them thought of asking for additional light in the room, and they buried themselves thus in the shadow, as if they had wished to bury themselves in forgetfulness.

"Chevalier," said the duchess, "you have never given me a single sign of life since our interview at Fontainebleau; and I confess that your presence there on the day of the Franciscan's death, and your initiation in certain secrets, caused me the liveliest astonishment I ever experienced in my whole life."

"I can explain my presence there to you, as well as my initiation," said Aramis.

"But let us, first of all," replied the duchess, quickly, "talk a little of ourselves, for our friendship is by no means of recent date."

"Yes, Madame; and if Heaven wills it, we shall continue to be friends, — I will not say for a long time, but forever."

"That is quite certain, Chevalier, and my visit is a proof of it."

"Our interests, Madame the Duchess, are no longer the same that they used to be," said Aramis, smiling without reserve in the dim light, which could not show that his smile was less agreeable and less bright than formerly.

"No, Chevalier, at the present day we have other interests. Every period of life brings its own; and as we now

understand each other in conversing as perfectly as we formerly did without saying a word, let us talk, if you like."

"I am at your orders, Duchess. Ah! I beg your pardon; how did you obtain my address, and what was your object?"

"You ask me why? I have told you. Curiosity, in the first place. I wished to know what you could have to do with the Franciscan with whom I had certain business, and who died so singularly. You know that on the occasion of our interview at Fontainebleau, in the cemetery, at the foot of the grave so recently closed, we were both so much overcome by our emotions that we omitted to confide anything to each other."

"Yes, Madame."

"Well, then, I had no sooner left you than I repented, and have ever since been most anxious to ascertain the truth. You know that Madame de Longueville and myself are almost one, I suppose?"

"I was not aware of it," said Aramis, discreetly.

"I remembered, then," continued the duchess, "that neither of us said anything to the other in the cemetery; that you did not speak of the relationship in which you stood to the Franciscan, whose burial you had superintended, and that I did not refer to the position in which I stood to him, — all which seemed to me very unworthy of two such old friends as ourselves; and I have sought an opportunity of an interview with you in order to give you proof that I had found you, and that Marie Michon, now no more, has left behind her a representative with a good memory."

Aramis bowed over the duchess's hand, and pressed his lips upon it. "You must have had some trouble to find me again," he said.

"Yes," answered the duchess, annoyed to find the subject taking a turn which Aramis wished to give it; "but I knew that you were a friend of M. Fouquet, and so I inquired in that direction."

"A friend! Oh," exclaimed the chevalier, "you exaggerate, Madame! A poor priest who has been favored by so generous a protector, and whose heart is full of gratitude and devotion to him, is all that I am to M. Fouquet."

"He made you a bishop?"

"Yes, Duchess."

"So, my fine musketeer, that is your retirement!"

"In the same way that political intrigue is for yourself," thought Aramis. "And so," he said, "you inquired after me at M. Fouquet's?"

"Easily enough. You had been to Fontainebleau with him, and had undertaken a voyage to your diocese,—which is Belle-Isle-en-Mer, I believe."

"No, Madame," said Aramis; "my diocese is Vannes."

"I meant that. I only thought that Belle-Isle-en-Mer—"

"Is a property belonging to M. Fouquet,—nothing more."

"Ah! I had been told that Belle-Isle was fortified; besides, I know that you are a military man, my friend."

"I have forgotten everything of the kind since I entered the church," said Aramis, annoyed.

"Very well. I then learned that you had returned from Vannes, and I sent to one of our friends, M. le Comte de la Fère, who is discretion itself; but he answered that he was not aware of your address."

"So like Athos," thought the bishop; "that which is actually good never alters."

"Well, then, you know that I cannot venture to show

myself here, and that the queen-mother has always some grievance or other against me."

"Yes, indeed; and I am surprised at it."

"Oh, there are various reasons for it! But, to continue; being obliged to conceal myself, I was fortunate enough to meet with M. d'Artagnan, — one of your old friends, I believe."

"A friend of mine still, Duchess."

"He gave me some information, and sent me to M. de Baisemeaux, the governor of the Bastille."

Aramis started; and a light flashed from his eyes in the darkness of the room which he could not conceal from his keen-sighted friend. "M. de Baisemeaux!" he said; "why did D'Artagnan send you to M. de Baisemeaux?"

"I cannot tell you."

"What can this possibly mean?" said the bishop, summoning all the resources of his mind to his aid, in order to carry on the combat in a befitting manner.

"M. de Baisemeaux is greatly indebted to you, D'Artagnan told me."

"True, he is so."

"And the address of a creditor is as easily ascertained as that of a debtor."

"Also very true; and so Baisemeaux indicated to you —"

"St. Mandé, where I forwarded a letter to you —"

"Which I have in my hand, and which is most precious to me," said Aramis, "because I am indebted to it for the pleasure of seeing you."

The duchess, satisfied at having so successfully passed over the various difficulties of so delicate an explanation, began to breathe freely again; which Aramis, however, could not succeed in doing. "We had got as far as your visit to Baisemeaux, I believe?" said he.

"Nay," said the duchess, laughing, "further than that."

"In that case we must have been speaking about your grudge against the queen-mother."

"Further still," returned the duchess, "further still; we were talking of the connection —"

"Which existed between you and the Franciscan," said Aramis, interrupting her eagerly; "well, I am listening to you very attentively."

"It is easily explained," returned the duchess, making up her mind. "You know that I am living at Brussels with M. de Laicques?"

"I have heard so, Madame."

"You know that my children have ruined and stripped me of everything?"

"How terrible, dear duchess!"

"Terrible, indeed! This obliged me to resort to some means of obtaining a livelihood, and particularly to avoid vegetating. I had old hatreds to turn to account, old friendships to serve; I no longer had either credit or protectors."

"You, too, who had extended protection towards so many persons," said Aramis, blandly.

"It is always the case, Chevalier. Well, at that time I saw the King of Spain."

"Ah!"

"Who had just nominated a general of the Jesuits, according to the usual custom."

"Is it usual, indeed?"

"Were you not aware of it?"

"I beg your pardon; I was inattentive."

"You must be aware of that, — you who were on such good terms with the Franciscan."

"With the general of the Jesuits, you mean?"

"Exactly. Well, then, I saw the King of Spain, who

wished to do me a service, but was unable. He gave me recommendations, however, to Flanders, both for myself and for Laicques, and conferred a pension on me out of the funds of the order."

"Of Jesuits?"

"Yes. The general — I mean the Franciscan — was sent to me; and in order to give regularity to the transaction, in accordance with the statutes of the order, I was reputed to be in a position to render certain services. You are aware that that is the rule?"

"I was not aware of it."

Madame de Chevreuse paused to look at Aramis, but it was quite dark. "Well, such is the rule," she resumed. "I ought, therefore, to seem to possess a power of usefulness of some kind or other. I proposed to travel for the order, and I was placed on the list of affiliated travellers. You understand that it was a formality, by means of which I received my pension, which was very convenient for me."

"Good heavens! Duchess, what you tell me is like a dagger-thrust to me. *You* obliged to receive a pension from the Jesuits?"

"No, Chevalier; from Spain."

"Ah! except as a conscientious scruple, Duchess, you will admit that it is pretty nearly the same thing."

"No, not at all."

"But, surely, of your magnificent fortune there must remain — "

"Dampierre is all that remains."

"And that is handsome enough."

"Yes; but Dampierre is burdened, mortgaged, and somewhat in ruins, like its owner."

"And can the queen-mother see all that without shedding a tear?" said Aramis, with a penetrating look, which encountered nothing but the darkness.

"Yes, she has forgotten everything."

"You have, I believe, Duchess, attempted to get restored to favor?"

"Yes; but, most singularly, the young king inherits the antipathy that his dear father had for me. Ah, you too will tell me that I am indeed a woman to be hated, and that I am no longer one who can be loved"

"Dear duchess, pray arrive soon at the circumstance which brought you here; for I think we can be of service to each other."

"Such has been my own thought. I came to Fontainebleau, then, with a double object in view. In the first place, I was summoned there by the Franciscan whom you knew. By the by, how did you know him? — for I have told you my story, and have not yet heard yours."

"I knew him in a very natural way, Duchess. I studied theology with him at Parma; we became fast friends, but it happened, from time to time, that business or travels or war separated us from each other."

"You were, of course, aware that he was the general of the Jesuits?"

"I suspected it."

"But by what extraordinary chance did you come to the hotel where the affiliated travellers had met together?"

"Oh," said Aramis, in a calm voice, "it was the merest chance in the world! I was going to Fontainebleau to see M. Fouquet, for the purpose of obtaining an audience of the king. I was passing by, unknown; I saw the poor dying monk in the road, and recognized him. You know the rest, — he died in my arms."

"Yes, but bequeathing to you so vast a power in heaven and on earth that you issue sovereign orders in his name."

"He did leave me a few commissions to settle."

"And for me?"

"I have told you, — a sum of twelve thousand livres was to be paid to you. I thought I had given you the necessary signature to enable you to receive it. Did you not get the money?"

"Oh, yes, yes! My dear prelate, you give your orders, I am informed, with so much mystery and such august majesty that it is generally believed you are the successor of the beloved dead."

Aramis colored impatiently, and the duchess continued. "I have obtained information," she said, "from the King of Spain himself; and he dispelled my doubts on the point. Every general of the Jesuits is nominated by him, and must be a Spaniard, according to the statutes of the order. You are not a Spaniard, nor have you been nominated by the King of Spain."

Aramis did not reply to this remark, except to say, "You see, Duchess, how greatly you were mistaken, since the King of Spain told you that."

"Yes, my dear Aramis; but there was something else of which I have been thinking."

"What is that?"

"You know that I do a great deal of desultory thinking; and it occurred to me that you know the Spanish language."

"Every Frenchman who has been actively engaged in the Fronde knows Spanish."

"You have lived in Flanders?"

"Three years."

"And have stayed at Madrid?"

"Fifteen months."

"You are in a position, then, to become a naturalised Spaniard when you like,"

"Really?" said Aramis, with a frankness which deceived the duchess.

"Undoubtedly. Two years' residence and an acquaintance with the language are indispensable. You have had three years and a half, — fifteen months more than is necessary."

"What are you driving at, my dear lady?"

"At this, — I am on good terms with the King of Spain."

"And I am not on bad terms," thought Aramis to himself.

"Do you wish me to ask the king," continued the duchess, "to confer the succession to the Franciscan's office upon you?"

"Oh, Duchess!"

"You have it already, perhaps?" she said.

"No, upon my honor."

"Very well, then, I can render you that service."

"Why did you not render the same service to M. de Laicques, Duchess? He is a very talented man, and one whom you love."

"Yes, no doubt; but that is not to be considered. At all events, putting Laicques aside, answer me, will you have it?"

"No, I thank you, Duchess."

She paused. "He is nominated," she thought; and then resumed aloud, "If you refuse me in this manner, it is not very encouraging for me to ask anything of you."

"Oh, ask, pray ask!"

"Ask! I cannot do so if you have not the power to grant what I want."

"However limited my power and ability, ask all the same."

"I need a sum of money to restore Dampierre."

"Ah!" replied Aramis, coldly, "money? Well, Duchess, how much would you require?"

"Oh, a tolerably round sum!"

"So much the worse, — you know I am not rich."

"No, you are not; but the order is. And if you had been the general — "

"You know I am not the general."

"In that case you have a friend who must be very wealthy, — M. Fouquet."

"M. Fouquet! He is more than half ruined, Madame."

"So it is said, but I would not believe it."

"Why, Duchess?"

"Because I have, or rather Laicques has, certain letters in his possession from Cardinal Mazarin, which establish the existence of very strange accounts."

"What accounts?"

"Relative to various sums of money borrowed and disposed of. I do not fully remember; but the point is that the superintendent, according to these letters, which are signed by Mazarin, had taken thirty millions from the coffers of the State. The case is a very serious one."

Aramis clinched his hands in anxiety and apprehension. "Is it possible," he said, "that you have such letters, and have not communicated them to M. Fouquet?"

"Ah!" replied the Duchess, "I keep such little matters as these in reserve. When the day of need comes, we will take them from the closet"

"And that day has arrived?" said Aramis.

"Yes."

"And you are going to show those letters to M. Fouquet?"

"I prefer instead to talk about them with you."

"You must be in sad want of money, my poor friend,

to think of such things as these, — you, too, who held M. de Mazarin's prose effusions in such indifferent esteem."

"The fact is, I am in want of money."

"And then," continued Aramis, in cold accents, "it must have been very distressing to you to be obliged to have recourse to such a means. It is cruel."

"Oh, if I had wished to do harm instead of good," said Madame de Chevreuse, "instead of asking the general of the order or M. Fouquet for the five hundred thousand livres I require — "

"Five hundred thousand livres!"

"Yes; no more. Do you think it much? I require at least as much as that to restore Dampierre."

"Yes, Madame."

"I say, therefore, that instead of asking for this amount I should have gone to see my old friend the queen-mother; the letters from her husband, the Signor Mazarini, would have served me as an introduction, and I should have begged this mere trifle of her, saying to her, 'I wish, Madame, to have the honor of receiving your Majesty at Dampierre. Permit me to put Dampierre in a fit state for that purpose.'"

Aramis did not say a single word in reply. "Well," she said, "what are you thinking about?"

"I am making certain additions," said Aramis.

"And M. Fouquet makes subtractions. I, on the other hand, am trying the art of multiplication. What excellent calculators we are! How well we could understand one another!"

"Will you allow me to reflect?" said Aramis.

"No; to such an overture between persons like ourselves, 'Yes' or 'No' should be the reply, and that immediately."

"It is a snare," thought the bishop; "it is impossible

that Anne of Austria would listen to such a woman as this."

"Well!" said the Duchess.

"Well, Madame, I should be very much astonished if M. Fouquet had five hundred thousand livres at his disposal at the present moment."

"It is of no use speaking of it further, then," said the Duchess, "and Dampierre must get restored how it can."

"Oh, you are not embarrassed to such an extent as that, I suppose?"

"No; I am never embarrassed."

"And the queen," continued the bishop, "will certainly do for you what the superintendent is unable to do."

"Oh, certainly! But tell me, do you not think it would be better that I should speak myself to M. Fouquet about these letters?"

"You will do whatever you please in that respect, Duchess. M. Fouquet either feels or does not feel himself to be guilty. If he really be so, I know that he is proud enough not to confess it; if he be not so, he will be exceedingly offended at your menace."

"As usual, you reason like an angel," said the Duchess, rising.

"And so you are going to denounce M. Fouquet to the queen," said Aramis.

"Denounce? Oh, what a disagreeable word! I shall not denounce, my dear friend. You now know matters of policy too well to be ignorant how easily these affairs are arranged. I shall merely side against M. Fouquet, and nothing more; and in a war of party against party a weapon is a weapon."

"No doubt."

"And once on friendly terms again with the queen-mother, I may be dangerous towards some persons."

"You are at perfect liberty to be so, Duchess."

"A liberty of which I shall avail myself, my dear friend."

"You are not ignorant, I suppose, Duchess, that M. Fouquet is on the best terms with the King of Spain?"

"Oh, I suppose so!"

"If, therefore, you begin a party warfare against M. Fouquet, he will reply in the same way, for he too is at perfect liberty to do so, is he not?"

"Oh, certainly!"

"And as he is on good terms with Spain, he will make use of that friendship as a weapon."

"You mean that he will be on good terms with the general of the order of the Jesuits, my dear Aramis."

"That may be the case, Duchess."

"And that, consequently, the pension I have been receiving from the order will be stopped."

"I am greatly afraid it might be."

"Well, I must contrive to console myself; for after Richelieu, after the Frondes, after exile, what is there left for Madame de Chevreuse to fear?"

"The pension, you are aware, is forty-eight thousand livres."

"Alas! I am quite aware of it."

"Moreover, in party contests, you know, the friends of the enemy do not escape."

"Ah! you mean that poor Laicques will have to suffer."

"I am afraid it is almost inevitable, Duchess."

"Oh, he receives only twelve thousand livres' pension."

"Yes, but the King of Spain has some influence left; advised by M. Fouquet, he might get M. Laicques shut up in some fortress."

"I have no great fear of that, my good friend; because, thanks to a reconciliation with Anne of Austria, I will

undertake that France shall insist upon Laicques's liberation."

"True. In that case you will have something else to apprehend."

"What can that be?" said the duchess, pretending to be surprised and terrified.

"You will learn — indeed, you must know it already — that having once been an affiliated member of the order, it is not easy to leave it; for the secrets that any particular member may have acquired are unwholesome, and carry with them the germs of misfortune for whoever may reveal them."

The duchess considered for a moment, and then said, "That is more serious, I will think it over."

Notwithstanding the profound obscurity in which he sat, Aramis seemed to feel a burning glance, like a hot iron, escape from his friend's eyes and plunge into his heart.

"Let us recapitulate," said Aramis, determined to keep himself on his guard, and gliding his hand into his breast, where he had a dagger concealed.

"Exactly, let us recapitulate; good accounts make good friends."

"The suppression of your pension — "

"Forty-eight thousand livres and that of Laicques's twelve make together sixty thousand livres; that is what you mean, I suppose?"

"Precisely; and I was trying to find out what would be your equivalent for that."

"Five hundred thousand livres, which I shall get from the queen."

"Or which you will not get."

"I know a means of procuring them," said the duchess, thoughtlessly.

This remark made the chevalier prick up his ears; and

from the moment when his adversary had committed this error, his mind was so thoroughly on its guard that he seemed every moment to gain the advantage more and more, and she, consequently, to lose it. "I will admit, for argument's sake, that you obtain the money," he resumed; "you will lose twice as much, having a hundred thousand livres' pension to receive instead of sixty thousand, and that for a period of ten years."

"Not so, for I shall only be subjected to this diminution of my income during the period of M. Fouquet's remaining in power, — a period which I estimate at two months."

"Ah!" said Aramis.

"I am frank, you see."

"I thank you for it, Duchess; but you would be wrong to suppose that after M. Fouquet's disgrace the order would resume the payment of your pension."

"I know a means of making the order come down with its money, as I know a means of forcing the queen-mother to concede what I require."

"In that case, Duchess, we are all obliged to strike our flags to you. The victory is yours, and the triumph also is yours. Be clement, I entreat you!"

"But is it possible," resumed the duchess, without taking notice of the irony, "that you really draw back from a miserable sum of five hundred thousand livres when it is a question of sparing you — I mean your friend — I beg your pardon, I ought rather to say your protector — the disagreeable consequences which a party contest produces?"

"Duchess, I will tell you why. Supposing the five hundred thousand livres were to be given to you, M. de Laicques will require his share, which will be another five hundred thousand livres, I presume; and then, after M.

de Laicques's and your own portions, will come the portions for your children, your poor pensioners, and various other persons; and these letters, however compromising they may be, are not worth from three to four millions. Good heavens! Duchess, the Queen of France's diamonds were surely worth more than those bits of waste paper signed by Mazarin; and yet their recovery did not cost a fourth part of what you ask for yourself."

"Yes, that is true; but the merchant values his goods at his own price, and it is for the purchaser to buy or to refuse."

"Stay a moment, Duchess; would you like me to tell you why I will not buy your letters?"

"Pray tell me."

"Because the letters which you say are Mazarin's are false."

"Nonsense!"

"I have no doubt of it; for it would, to say the least, be very singular that after you had quarrelled with the queen through M. Mazarin's means, you should have kept up any intimate acquaintance with the latter; it would savor of passion, of treachery, of— Upon my word, I do not like to make use of the term."

"Oh pray say it!"

"Of compliance."

"That is quite true; but what is not less so is that which the letter contains."

"I pledge you my word, Duchess, that you will not be able to make use of it with the queen."

"Oh, yes, indeed; I can make use of everything with the queen."

"Very good," thought Aramis. "Croak on, old owl! hiss, viper that you are!"

But the duchess had said enough, and advanced a few

steps towards the door. Aramis, however, had reserved a humiliation which she did not expect,—the imprecation of the vanquished behind the car of the conqueror. He rang the bell. Candles immediately appeared in the room; and the bishop found himself completely encircled by lights, which shone upon the worn, haggard face of the duchess Aramis fixed a long and ironical look upon her pale and withered cheeks, upon her dim, dull eyes, and upon her lips, which she kept carefully closed over her blackened and scanty teeth. He, however, had thrown himself into a graceful attitude, with his haughty and intelligent head thrown back; he smiled so as to reveal his teeth, which were still brilliant and dazzling in the candle-light.

The old coquette understood the trick that had been played upon her. She was standing immediately before a large mirror, in which all her decrepitude, so carefully concealed, was only made more manifest by the contrast. Thereupon, without even saluting Aramis, who bowed with the ease and grace of the musketeer of early days, she hurried away with tottering steps, which her very haste only the more impeded. Aramis sprang across the room like a zephyr to lead her to the door. Madame de Chevreuse made a sign to her huge lackey, who resumed his musket; and she left the house where such tender friends had not been able to understand each other only because they had understood each other too well.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

WHEREIN MAY BE SEEN THAT A BARGAIN WHICH CANNOT BE MADE WITH ONE PERSON CAN BE CARRIED OUT WITH ANOTHER.

ARAMIS had been perfectly correct in his supposition. Immediately on leaving the house in the Place Baudoyer, Madame de Chevreuse had proceeded homeward. She was doubtless afraid of being followed, and had sought in this way to cover her steps; but as soon as she had arrived within the door of the hotel, and assured herself that no one who could cause her any uneasiness was on her track, she opened the door of the garden leading into another street, and hurried towards the Rue Croix-des-Petits-Champs, where M. Colbert resided.

We have already said that evening, or rather night, had closed in, — and it was a dark, thick night. Paris had once more sunk into its calm, quiescent state, enshrouding alike within its indulgent mantle the high-born duchess carrying out her political intrigue, and the simple citizen's wife who having been detained late by a supper in the city was proceeding homewards, on the arm of a lover, by the longest possible route.

Madame de Chevreuse had been too well accustomed to nocturnal politics not to know that a minister never denies himself, even at his own private residence, to any young and beautiful woman who may chance to object to the dust and confusion of a public office; or to old women, as full of experience as of years, who dislike the indiscreet echo of official residences. A valet received the duchess under the peristyle, and received her, it must be admitted, with some indifference of manner; he intimated, after having looked at her face, that it was hardly at such an hour that one so advanced in years as herself could be permitted to disturb M. Colbert's important occupations. But Madame de Chevreuse, without disquietude, wrote her name upon a leaf of her tablets,—a blusterous name, which had so often sounded disagreeably in the ears of Louis XIII. and of the great cardinal. She wrote her name in the large ill-formed characters of the higher classes of that period, folded the paper in a manner peculiarly her own, and handed it to the valet without uttering a word, but with so haughty and imperious a gesture that the fellow, well accustomed to judge of people from their manners and appearance, perceived at once the quality of the person before him, bowed his head, and ran to M. Colbert's room.

The minister could not control a sudden exclamation as he opened the paper; and the valet, gathering from it the interest with which his master regarded the mysterious visitor, returned as fast as he could to beg the duchess to follow him. She ascended to the first floor of the beautiful new house very slowly, rested herself on the landing-place in order not to enter the apartment out of breath, and appeared before M. Colbert, who with his own hands held open the folding-doors. The duchess paused at the threshold for the purpose of studying well the character of

the man with whom she was about to converse. At the first glance the round, large, heavy head, thick brows, and ill-favored features of Colbert, who wore, thrust low down on his head, a cap like a priest's *calotte*, seemed to indicate that but little difficulty was likely to be met with in her negotiations with him, but also that she was to expect little interest in the discussion of particulars; for there was scarcely any indication that that rude man could be susceptible to the attractions of a refined revenge or of an exalted ambition. But when on closer inspection the duchess perceived the small, piercingly black eyes, the longitudinal wrinkles of his high and massive forehead, the imperceptible twitching of the lips, on which were apparent traces of rough good-humor, she changed her mind and said to herself, "I have found the man I want."

"What has procured me the honor of your visit, Madame?" he inquired.

"The need I have of you, Monsieur," returned the duchess, "and that which you have of me."

"I am delighted, Madame, with the first portion of your sentence; but so far as the second portion is concerned —"

Madame de Chevreuse sat down in the arm-chair which M. Colbert placed before her. "M. Colbert, you are the intendant of finances?"

"Yes, Madame."

"And are ambitious of becoming the superintendent?"

"Madame!"

"Nay, do not deny it! That would only unnecessarily prolong our conversation, — it is useless."

"And yet, Madame," replied the intendant, "however well disposed and inclined to show politeness I may be towards a lady of your position and merit, nothing will

make me confess that I have ever entertained the idea of supplanting my superior."

"I said nothing about supplanting, M. Colbert. Could I accidentally have made use of that word? I hardly think so. The word 'replace' is less aggressive in its signification, and more grammatically suitable, as M. de Voiture would say. I presume, therefore, that you are ambitious of replacing M. Fouquet."

"M. Fouquet's fortune, Madame, enables him to withstand all attempts. The superintendent in this age plays the part of the Colossus of Rhodes; the vessels pass beneath him, and do not overthrow him."

"I ought to have availed myself of that very comparison. It is true. M. Fouquet plays the part of the Colossus of Rhodes; but I remember to have heard it said by M. Conrart (a member of the Academy, I believe), that when the Colossus of Rhodes fell from its lofty position, the merchant who had cast it down — a merchant, nothing more, M. Colbert — loaded four hundred camels with the ruins. A merchant! — that is considerably less than an intendant of finances."

"Madame, I can assure you that I shall never overthrow M. Fouquet."

"Very good, M. Colbert, since you persist in showing so much sensitiveness with me, as if you were ignorant that I am Madame de Chevreuse, and also that I am somewhat advanced in years, — in other words, that you have to do with a woman who has had political dealings with the Cardinal de Richelieu, and who has no time to lose, — since, I say, you commit that imprudence, I shall go and find others who are more intelligent and more desirous of making their fortunes."

"How, Madame, how?"

"You give me a very poor idea of the negotiations of

the present day, Monsieur. I assure you that if in my time a woman had gone to M. de Cinq-Mars, who was not moreover a man of a very high order of intellect, and had said to him about the cardinal what I have just now said to you of M. Fouquet, M. de Cinq-Mars would by this time have put his irons in the fire."

"Nay, Madame, show a little indulgence."

"Well, then, you do really consent to replace M. Fouquet?"

"Certainly, I do, if the king dismisses M. Fouquet."

"Again a word too much, it is quite evident that if you have not yet succeeded in driving M. Fouquet from his post, it is because you have not been able to do so. Therefore I should be a simpleton if in coming to you I did not bring you the very thing you require."

"I am distressed to be obliged to persist, Madame," said Colbert, after a silence which enabled the duchess to sound the depth of his dissimulation; "but I must warn you that for the last six years denunciation after denunciation has been made against M. Fouquet, and he has remained unshaken and unaffected by them."

"There is a time for everything, M. Colbert; those who were the authors of such denunciations were not called Madame de Chevreuse, and they had no proofs equal to the six letters from M. de Mazarin which establish the offence in question."

"The offence!"

"The crime, if you like it better."

"The crime — committed by M. Fouquet!"

"Nothing less. It is rather strange, M. Colbert; but your face, which just now was cold and indifferent, is now all lighted up."

"A crime!"

"I am delighted to see it makes an impression upon you."

"Oh, that is a word, Madame, which embraces so many things!"

"It embraces the post of superintendent of finance for yourself, and a letter of exile or the Bastille for M. Fouquet."

"Forgive me, Madame the Duchess, but it is almost impossible that M. Fouquet can be exiled; to be imprisoned or disgraced, that alone is much."

"Oh, I am perfectly aware of what I am saying!" returned Madame de Chevreuse, coldly. "I do not live at such a distance from Paris as not to know what takes place there. The king does not like M. Fouquet, and he would willingly sacrifice the superintendent if an opportunity were only presented."

"It must be a good one, though."

"Good enough, and one I estimate to be worth five hundred thousand livres."

"In what way?" said Colbert.

"I mean, Monsieur, that holding this opportunity in my own hands I will not allow it to be transferred to yours except for a sum of five hundred thousand livres."

"I understand you perfectly, Madame. But since you have fixed a price for the sale, let me now see the value of the articles to be sold."

"Oh, a mere trifle, — six letters, as I have already told you, from M. de Mazarin; and the autographs will most assuredly not be regarded as too costly, if they establish in an irrefutable manner that M. Fouquet has embezzled large sums of money from the treasury and appropriated them to his own purposes."

"In an irrefutable manner, do you say?" observed Colbert, whose eyes sparkled with delight.

"Irrefutable; would you like to read the letters?"

"With all my heart! Copies, of course?"

"Of course, the copies," said the duchess, as she drew from her bosom a small packet of papers flattened by her velvet bodice. "Read!" she said.

Colbert eagerly snatched the papers and devoured them.

"Wonderful!" he said.

"It is clear enough, is it not?"

"Yes, Madame, yes. M. Mazarin must have handed the money to M. Fouquet, who must have kept it for his own purposes; but the question is, what money?"

"Exactly, — what money; if we come to terms, I will join to these six letters a seventh, which will supply you with the fullest particulars."

Colbert reflected. "And the originals of these letters?"

"A useless question to ask; exactly as if I were to ask you, M. Colbert, whether the money-bags you will give me will be full or empty."

"Very good, Madame."

"Is it concluded?"

"No; for there is one circumstance to which neither of us has given any attention."

"Name it!"

"M. Fouquet can be utterly ruined, under the circumstances you have detailed, only by means of legal proceedings."

"Well?"

"A public scandal."

"Yes, what then?"

"Neither the legal proceedings nor the scandal can be begun against him."

"Why not?"

"Because he is procureur-général of the parliament; because, too, in France, the government, the army, the courts of law, and commerce are intimately connected by ties of good-will, which people call *esprit de corps*. So,

Madame, the parliament will never permit its chief to be dragged before a public tribunal; and never, even if he be dragged there by royal authority, never will he be condemned."

"Ah! *ma foi!* M. Colbert, that does n't concern me."

"I am aware of that, Madame; but it concerns me, and it consequently diminishes the value of what you have brought to me. Of what use to bring me a proof of crime, without the possibility of condemnation?"

"Even if he be only suspected, M. Fouquet will lose his post of superintendent."

"That would be a great achievement!" exclaimed Colbert, whose dark, gloomy features were momentarily lighted up by an expression of hate and vengeance.

"Ah, ah! M. Colbert," said the duchess, "forgive me, but I did not think you were so impressionable. Very good; in that case, since you need more than I have to give you, there is no occasion to speak of the matter further."

"Yes, Madame, we will go on talking of it; only, as the value of your commodities has decreased, you must lower your price."

"You are bargaining, then?"

"Every man who wishes to deal loyally is obliged to do so."

"How much will you offer me?"

"Two hundred thousand livres," said Colbert.

The duchess laughed in his face, and then said suddenly, "Wait a moment, I have another arrangement to propose; will you give me three hundred thousand livres?"

"No, no."

"Oh, you can either accept or refuse my terms; besides, that is not all."

"More still? You are becoming too impracticable to deal with, Madame."

"Less so than you think, perhaps, for it is not money I am going to ask you for."

"What is it, then?"

"A service. You know that I have always been most affectionately attached to the queen, and I am desirous of having an interview with her Majesty."

"With the queen?"

"Yes, M. Colbert, with the queen, who is, I admit, no longer my friend, and who has ceased to be so for a long time past, but who may again become so if the opportunity be only given her."

"Her Majesty has ceased to receive any one, Madame. She is a great sufferer, and you may be aware that the paroxysms of her disease occur with greater frequency than ever."

"That is the very reason why I wish to have an interview with her Majesty. In Flanders we have many diseases of that kind."

"Cancers? — a fearful, incurable disorder."

"Do not believe that, M. Colbert. The Flemish peasant is something of a savage; he has not a wife exactly, but a female."

"Well, Madame?"

"Well, M. Colbert, while he is smoking his pipe, the woman works; it is she who draws the water from the well, — she who loads the mule or the ass, and even bears herself a portion of the burden. Taking but little care of herself, she gets knocked about here and there, sometimes is even beaten. Cancers arise from contusions."

"True, true!" said Colbert.

"The Flemish women do not die the sooner on that account. When they are great sufferers from this disease,

they go in search of remedies; and the Béguines of Bruges are excellent doctors for every kind of disease. They have precious waters of one sort or another,— specifics of various kinds; and they give a bottle and a wax candle to the sufferer. They derive a profit from the priests, and serve God by the disposal of their two articles of merchandise. I will take the queen some of this holy water, which I will procure from the Béguines of Bruges; her Majesty will recover, and will burn as many wax candles as she may think fit. You see, M. Colbert, to prevent my seeing the queen is almost as bad as committing the crime of regicide."

"You are, Madame the Duchess, a woman of great intelligence. You surprise me; still, I cannot but suppose that this charitable consideration towards the queen covers some small personal interest of your own."

"Have I tried to conceal it, M. Colbert? You spoke, I believe, of a small personal interest. Understand, then, that it is a great interest; and I will prove it to you by resuming what I was saying. If you procure me a personal interview with her Majesty, I will be satisfied with the three hundred thousand livres I have demanded; if not, I shall keep my letters, unless, indeed, you give me on the spot five hundred thousand livres for them."

And rising from her seat with this decisive remark, the old duchess left M. Colbert in a disagreeable perplexity. To bargain any further was out of the question; not to purchase would involve infinite loss. "Madame," he said, "I shall have the pleasure of handing you over a hundred thousand crowns; but how shall I get the actual letters themselves?"

"In the simplest manner in the world, my dear M. Colbert, — whom will you trust?"

The financier began to laugh silently, so that his large

eyebrows went up and down like the wings of a bat upon the deep lines of his yellow forehead. "No one," he said.

"You surely will make an exception in your own favor, M. Colbert?"

"How is that, Madame?"

"I mean that if you would take the trouble to accompany me to the place where the letters are, they would be delivered into your own hands, and you would be able to verify and check them."

"Quite true."

"You would bring the hundred thousand crowns with you at the same time? — for I too do not trust any one."

Colbert colored to the tips of his ears. Like all eminent men in the art of figures, he was of an insolent and mathematical probity. "I will take with me, Madame," he said, "two orders for the amount agreed upon, payable at my treasury. Will that satisfy you?"

"Would that the orders on your treasury were for two millions, Monsieur the Intendant! I shall have the pleasure of showing you the way, then?"

"Allow me to order my carriage."

"I have a carriage below, Monsieur."

Colbert coughed like an irresolute man. He imagined for a moment that the proposition of the duchess was a snare; that perhaps some one was waiting at the door; and that she, whose secret had just been sold to Colbert for a hundred thousand crowns, had already offered it to Fouquet for the same sum. As he still hesitated a good deal, the duchess looked at him full in the face.

"You prefer your own carriage?" she said.

"I admit that I do."

"You suppose that I am going to lead you into a snare or trap of some sort or other?"

"Madame the Duchess, you have the character of being somewhat inconsiderate at times; and as I am clothed in a sober, solemn character, a jest or practical joke might compromise me."

"Yes; the fact is, you are afraid. Well, then, take your own carriage, as many servants as you like. Only, consider well, — what we two may arrange between us, we are the only persons who know it; what a third person may witness, we announce to the universe. After all, I do not make a point of it; my carriage shall follow yours, and I shall be satisfied to accompany you in your own carriage to the queen."

"To the queen!"

"Have you forgotten that already? Is it possible that one of the clauses of the agreement, of so much importance to me, can have escaped you already? How trifling it seems to you, indeed! If I had known it, I should have doubled my price."

"I have reflected, Madame, and I shall not accompany you."

"Really, — and why not?"

"Because I have the most perfect confidence in you."

"You overpower me. But how do I receive the hundred thousand crowns?"

"Here they are, Madame," said Colbert, scribbling a few lines on a piece of paper, which he handed to the duchess, adding, "You are paid."

"The trait is a fine one, M. Colbert, and I will reward you for it," she said, beginning to laugh.

Madame de Chevreuse's laugh had a very sinister sound. Every man who feels youth, faith, love, life itself, throbbing in his heart, would prefer tears to such a lamentable laugh.

The duchess opened the front of her dress and drew

forth from her bosom, somewhat less white than it once had been, a small packet of papers, tied with a flame-colored ribbon, and still laughing, she said, "There, M. Colbert, are the originals of Cardinal Mazarin's letters. They are now your own property," she added, refastening the body of her dress. "Your fortune is secured; and now accompany me to the queen."

"No, Madame; if you are again about to run the chance of her Majesty's displeasure, and it were known at the Palais-Royal that I had been the means of introducing you there, the queen would never forgive me while she lived. No; there are certain persons at the palace who are devoted to me, who will procure you an admission without my being compromised."

"Just as you please, provided I enter."

"What do you term those religious women at Bruges who cure disorders?"

"Béguines."

"Good; you are a Béguine."

"As you please, but I must soon cease to be one."

"That is your affair."

"Excuse me, but I do not wish to be exposed to a refusal."

"That is again your own affair, Madame. I am going to give directions to the head valet of the gentleman in waiting on her Majesty to allow admission to a Béguine, who brings an effectual remedy for her Majesty's sufferings. You are the bearer of my letter, you will undertake to be provided with the remedy, and will give every explanation on the subject. I admit a knowledge of a Béguine, but I deny all knowledge of Madame de Chevreuse. Here, Madame, then, is your letter of introduction."

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE SKIN OF THE BEAR.

COLBERT handed the duchess the letter, and gently drew aside the chair behind which she was standing. Madame de Chevreuse, with a very slight bow, immediately left the room. Colbert, who had recognized Mazarin's handwriting and had counted the letters, rang to summon his secretary, whom he enjoined to go in immediate search of M. Vanel, a counsellor of the parliament. The secretary replied that, according to his usual practice, M. Vanel had just at that moment entered the house, in order to render to the intendant an account of the principal details of the business which had been transacted during the day in the sitting of the parliament. Colbert approached one of the lamps, read the letters of the deceased cardinal over again, smiled repeatedly as he recognized the great value of the papers which Madame de Chevreuse had just delivered to him, and burying his head in his hands for a few minutes reflected profoundly. In the mean time a tall, large-made man entered the room; his spare, thin face, steady look, and hooked nose, as he entered Colbert's cabinet with a modest assurance of manner, revealed a character at once supple and decided, — supple towards the master who could throw him the prey; firm towards the dogs who might possibly be disposed to dispute it with him. M. Vanel carried a voluminous bundle of papers under his arm, and placed it on the desk on which Colbert was leaning both his elbows, as he supported his head.

"Good-day, M. Vanel," said the latter, rousing himself from his meditation.

"Good-day, Monseigneur," said Vanel, naturally.

"You should say 'Monsieur,' and not 'Monseigneur,'" replied Colbert, gently.

"We give the title of 'Monseigneur' to ministers," returned Vanel, with extreme self-possession, "and you are a minister."

"Not yet."

"You are so in point of fact, and I call you 'Monseigneur' accordingly; besides, you are my seigneur, and that is sufficient. If you dislike my calling you 'Monseigneur' before others, allow me, at least, to call you so in private."

Colbert raised his head to the height of the lamps, and read, or tried to read, upon Vanel's face how much actual sincerity entered into this protestation of devotion. But the counsellor knew perfectly well how to sustain the weight of his look, even were it armed with the full authority of the title he had conferred. Colbert sighed. He had read nothing in Vanel's face; Vanel might be sincere. Colbert recollected that this man, inferior to himself, was superior to him in having an unfaithful wife. At the moment he was pitying this man's lot, Vanel coolly drew from his pocket a perfumed letter, sealed with Spanish wax, and held it towards Colbert, saying, "A letter from my wife, Monseigneur."

Colbert coughed, took, opened, and read the letter, and then put it carefully away in his pocket; while Vanel, unconcerned, turned over the leaves of the papers he had brought with him.

"Vanel," Colbert said suddenly to his *protégé*, "you are a hard-working man?"

"Yes, Monseigneur."

"Would twelve hours of labor frighten you?"

"I work fifteen hours every day."

"Impossible! A counsellor need not work more than three hours a day in the parliament."

"Oh! I am working up some returns for a friend of mine in the department of accounts; and as I still have time left on my hands, I am studying Hebrew."

"Your reputation stands high in the parliament, Vanel."

"I believe so, Monseigneur."

"You must not grow rusty in your post of counsellor."

"What must I do to avoid it?"

"Purchase a high place. Small ambitions are the most difficult to satisfy."

"Small purses are the most difficult to fill, Monseigneur."

"What post have you in view?" said Colbert.

"I see none, — not one."

"There is one, certainly; but one need be the king himself to be able to buy it without inconvenience; and the king will not be inclined, I suppose, to purchase the post of procureur-général."

At these words Vanel fixed his dull and humble look upon Colbert, who could hardly tell whether Vanel had comprehended him or not. "Why do you speak to me, Monseigneur," said Vanel, "of the post of procureur-général to the parliament? I know no other post than the one M. Fouquet fills."

"Exactly so, my dear counsellor."

"You are not over-fastidious, Monseigneur; but before the post can be bought, it must be offered for sale."

"I believe, M. Vanel, that it will be for sale before long."

"For sale? What! M. Fouquet's post of procureur-général?"

"So it is said."

"The post which renders him inviolable, for sale! Oh, oh!" said Vanel, beginning to laugh.

"Would you be afraid, then, of the post?" said Colbert, gravely.

"Afraid! no; but —"

"Nor desirous of obtaining it?"

"You are laughing at me, Monseigneur," replied Vanel; "is it likely that a counsellor of the parliament would not be desirous of becoming procureur-général?"

"Well, M. Vanel, since I tell you that the post will be shortly for sale —"

"I cannot help repeating, Monseigneur, that it is impossible; a man never throws away the buckler behind which he maintains his honor, his fortune, and his life."

"There are certain men mad enough, Vanel, to fancy themselves out of the reach of all mischances."

"Yes, Monseigneur; but such men never commit their mad acts for the advantage of the poor Vanels of the world."

"Why not?"

"For the very reason that those Vanels are poor."

"It is true that M. Fouquet's post might cost a good round sum. What would you bid for it, M. Vanel?"

"Everything I am worth."

"Which means —"

"Three or four hundred thousand livres."

"And the post is worth —"

"A million and a half, at the very lowest. I know persons who have offered seventeen hundred thousand livres, without being able to persuade M. Fouquet to sell. Besides, supposing it were to happen that M. Fouquet wished to sell, — which I do not believe, in spite of what I have been told —"

"Ah, you have heard something about it, then! Who told you?"

"M. Gourville, M. Pellisson, and others."

"Very good; if, therefore, M. Fouquet did wish to sell —"

"I could not buy it just yet, since the superintendent will only sell for ready money, and no one has a million and a half to throw down at once."

Colbert suddenly interrupted the counsellor by an imperious gesture; he had begun to meditate. Observing his superior's serious attitude, and his perseverance in continuing the conversation on this subject, Vanel awaited the solution without venturing to precipitate it.

"Explain fully to me," said Colbert, at length, "the privileges of the office of procureur-général."

"The right of impeaching every French subject who is not a prince of the blood; the right of quashing all proceedings taken against any Frenchman who is neither king nor prince. The procureur-général is the arm of the king to strike the evil-doer, — his arm also to extinguish the torch of justice. M. Fouquet, therefore, will be able, by stirring up the parliament, to maintain himself even against the king; and the king also, by humoring M. Fouquet, can get his edicts registered without opposition. The procureur-général can be a very useful or a very dangerous instrument."

"Vanel, would you like to be procureur-général?" said Colbert, suddenly, softening both his look and his voice.

"I!" exclaimed the latter; "I have already had the honor to represent to you that I want about eleven hundred thousand livres to make up the amount."

"Borrow that sum from your friends."

"I have no friends richer than myself."

"You are an honorable man, Vanel."

"Ah, Monseigneur, if the world were to think as you do!"

"I think so, and that is quite enough; and if it should be needed, I will be your security."

"Remember the proverb, Monseigneur."

"What is that?"

"'The endorser pays.'"

"Let that make no difference."

Vanel rose, quite bewildered by this offer, which had been so suddenly and unexpectedly made to him by a man who treated the smallest affairs in a serious spirit. "You are not trifling with me, Monseigneur?" he said.

"Stay! we must act quickly. You say that M. Gourville has spoken to you about M. Fouquet's post?"

"Yes, and M. Pellisson also."

"Officially or officiously?"

"These were their words: 'These parliamentary people are ambitious and wealthy; they ought to get together two or three millions among themselves, to present to their protector and great luminary, M. Fouquet.'"

"And what did you reply?"

"I said that, for my own part, I would give ten thousand livres if necessary."

"Ah, you like M. Fouquet, then!" exclaimed Colbert, with a look full of hatred.

"No; but M. Fouquet is our chief. He is in debt, — is on the high-road to ruin; and we ought to save the honor of the body of which we are members."

"This explains to me why M. Fouquet will be always safe and sound so long as he occupies his present post," replied Colbert.

"Thereupon," said Vanel, "M. Gourville added: 'If we were to do anything out of charity to M. Fouquet, it could not be otherwise than most humiliating to him; and he

would be sure to refuse it. Let the parliament subscribe among themselves to purchase in a proper manner the post of procureur-général. In that case all would go on well; the honor of our body would be saved, and M. Fouquet's pride spared.'"

"That is an opening."

"I considered it so, Monseigneur."

"Well, M. Vanel, you will go at once, and find out either M. Gourville or M. Pellisson. Do you know any other friend of M. Fouquet?"

"I know M. de la Fontaine very well."

"La Fontaine, the rhymester?"

"Yes; he used to write verses to my wife, when M. Fouquet was one of our friends."

"Go to him, then, and try to procure an interview with the superintendent."

"Willingly — but the sum?"

"On the day and hour when you arrange to settle the matter, M. Vanel, you shall be supplied with the money; so do not make yourself uneasy on that account."

"Monseigneur, such munificence! You eclipse kings even, — you surpass M. Fouquet himself."

"Stay a moment! Do not let us mistake each other. I do not make you a present of fourteen hundred thousand livres, M. Vanel, for I have children to provide for; but I will lend you that sum."

"Ask whatever interest, whatever security you please, Monseigneur; I am quite ready. And when all your requisitions are satisfied, I will still repeat that you surpass kings and M. Fouquet in munificence. What conditions do you impose?"

"The repayment in eight years, and a mortgage upon the appointment itself."

"Certainly. Is that all?"

"Wait a moment! I reserve to myself the right of purchasing the post from you at one hundred and fifty thousand livres' profit for yourself, if in your mode of filling the office you do not follow out a line of conduct in conformity with the interests of the king and with my projects."

"Ah! ah!" said Vanel, in a slightly altered tone.

"Is there anything in that which can possibly be objectionable to you, M. Vanel?" said Colbert, coldly.

"Oh, no, no!" replied Vanel, quickly.

"Very good. We will sign an agreement to that effect whenever you like. And now go as quickly as you can to M. Fouquet's friends, and obtain an interview with the superintendent. Do not be too difficult in making whatever concessions may be required of you, and when once the arrangements are all made —"

"I will press him to sign."

"Be most careful to do nothing of the kind; do not speak of signatures with M. Fouquet, nor of deeds, nor even ask him to pass his word. Understand this, otherwise you will lose everything. All you have to do is to get M. Fouquet to give you his hand on the matter. Go, go!"

CHAPTER L.

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE QUEEN-MOTHER.

THE queen-mother was in her bedroom at the Palais-Royal, with Madame de Motteville and the Señora Molina. The king, who had been impatiently expected the whole day, had not made his appearance; and the queen, who had grown quite impatient, had often sent to inquire about him. The whole atmosphere of the court seemed to indicate an approaching storm; the courtiers and the ladies of the court avoided meeting in the antechambers and the corridors, in order not to converse on compromising subjects.

Monsieur had joined the king early in the morning for a hunting-party; Madame remained in her own apartments, cool and distant to every one; and the queen-mother, after she had said her prayers in Latin, talked of domestic matters with her two friends in pure Castilian. Madame de Motteville, who understood the language perfectly, answered her in French. When the three ladies had exhausted every form of dissimulation and politeness to reach at last the charge that the king's conduct was causing grief to the queen and the queen-mother and all his family, and when in guarded phrases they had fulminated every variety of imprecation against Mademoiselle de la Vallière, the queen-mother terminated these recriminations by an exclamation indicative of her own reflections and character. "*Estos hijos!*" said she to Molina (which means, "These children!" — words full of meaning on a mother's lips, — words full of terrible significance in the

mouth of a queen who, like Anne of Austria, hid many curious and dark secrets in her soul).

"Yes," said Molina, "these children! for whom every mother becomes a sacrifice."

"To whom," replied the queen, "a mother has sacrificed everything."

Anne did not finish her phrase; for she fancied, when she raised her eyes towards the full-length portrait of the pale Louis XIII., that light had once more flashed from her husband's dull eyes, and that his nostrils were inflated by wrath. The portrait became a living being; it did not speak, it threatened.

A profound silence succeeded the queen's last remark. La Molina began to turn over the ribbons and lace of a large work-table. Madame de Motteville, surprised at the look of mutual intelligence which had been exchanged between the confidante and her mistress, cast down her eyes like a discreet woman, and pretending to be observant of nothing that was passing listened with the utmost attention. She heard nothing, however, but a very significant "Hum!" on the part of the Spanish duenna, who was the image of circumspection, and a profound sigh on the part of the queen. She looked up immediately. "You are suffering?" she said.

"No, Motteville, no; why do you say that?"

"Your Majesty almost groaned just now."

"You are right; I do suffer a little."

"M. Vallot is not far off; I believe he is in Madame's apartment."

"Why is he with Madame?"

"Madame is troubled with nervous attacks."

"A very fine disorder, indeed!" said the queen. "M. Vallot is wrong in being there, when another physician might cure Madame."

Madame de Motteville looked up with an air of great surprise, as she replied, "Another doctor instead of M. Vallot! Who, then?"

"Occupation, Motteville, occupation! Ah! if any one is really ill, it is my poor daughter."

"And your Majesty too."

"Less so this evening, though."

"Do not believe that too confidently, Madame," said De Motteville.

As if to justify the caution, a sharp pain seized the queen, who turned deadly pale, and threw herself back in the chair, with every symptom of a sudden fainting-fit. "My drops!" she murmured.

"Ah! ah!" replied Molina, who went without haste to a richly gilded tortoise-shell cabinet, from which she took a large rock-crystal smelling-bottle, and brought it, open, to the queen, who inhaled from it wildly several times, and murmured, "In that way the Lord will kill me; his holy will be done!"

"Your Majesty's death is not so near at hand," added Molina, replacing the smelling-bottle in the cabinet.

"Does your Majesty feel better now?" inquired Madame de Motteville.

"Much better," returned the queen, placing her finger on her lips, to impose silence on her favorite.

"It is very strange," remarked Madame de Motteville, after a pause.

"What is strange?" said the queen.

"Does your Majesty remember the day when this pain attacked you for the first time?"

"I remember only that it was a grievously sad day for me, Motteville."

"But your Majesty had not always regarded that day as a sad one."

"Why?"

"Because twenty-three years before, on that very day, his present Majesty, your own glorious son, was born at the very same hour."

The queen uttered a loud cry, buried her face in her hands, and seemed utterly lost for some moments. Was it remembrance or reflection, or was it grief? La Molina darted a look at Madame de Motteville almost furious in its reproachfulness. The poor woman, ignorant of its meaning, was about to make inquiries in her own defence, when suddenly Anne of Austria arose and said: "Yes, the 5th of September; my sorrow began on the 5th of September. The greatest joy, one day; the deepest sorrow, the next, — the sorrow," she added in a low voice, "the bitter expiation of a too excessive joy."

And from that moment Anne of Austria, whose memory and reason seemed to have become entirely suspended for a time, remained impenetrable, with vacant look, mind almost wandering, and hands hanging heavily down, as if life had almost departed.

"We must put her to bed," said La Molina.

"Presently, Molina."

"Let us leave the queen alone," added the Spanish attendant.

Madame de Motteville rose. Large and glistening tears were fast rolling down the queen's pallid face; and Molina, having observed this sign of weakness, fixed her vigilant black eyes upon her.

"Yes, yes," replied the queen. "Leave us, Motteville; go!"

The word "us" produced a disagreeable effect upon the ears of the French favorite; for it signified that an interchange of secrets or of revelations of the past was about

to be made, and that one person was *de trop* in the conversation which seemed likely to take place.

"Will Molina be sufficient for your Majesty to-night?" inquired the Frenchwoman.

"Yes," replied the queen.

Madame de Motteville bowed in submission, and was about to withdraw, when suddenly an old female attendant, dressed as if she had belonged to the Spanish Court of the year 1620, opened the door and surprised the queen in her tears, Madame de Motteville in her skilful retreat, and Molina in her strategy. "The remedy!" she cried delightedly to the queen, as she unceremoniously approached the group.

"What remedy, *Chica?*" said Anne of Austria.

"For your Majesty's sufferings," the former replied.

"Who brings it?" asked Madame de Motteville, eagerly, — "M. Vallot?"

"No; a lady from Flanders."

"From Flanders? Is she Spanish?" inquired the queen.

"I don't know."

"Who sent her?"

"M. Colbert."

"Her name?"

"She did not mention it."

"Her position in life?"

"She will answer that herself."

"Her face?"

"She is masked."

"Go, Molina; go and see!" cried the queen.

"It is needless," suddenly replied a voice, at once firm and gentle in its tone, which proceeded from the other side of the tapestry hangings, — a voice which startled the attendants and made the queen tremble. At the same moment a woman, masked, appeared between the curtains, and before the queen could speak added, "I am connected

with the order of the Béguines of Bruges, and do indeed bring with me the remedy which is certain to effect a cure of your Majesty's complaint."

No one uttered a sound, and the Béguine did not move a step.

"Speak!" said the queen.

"I will when we are alone," was the answer.

Anne of Austria looked at her attendants, who immediately withdrew. The Béguine thereupon advanced a few steps towards the queen, and bowed reverently before her. The queen gazed with increasing mistrust at this woman, who in her turn fixed a pair of brilliant eyes upon the queen through openings in the mask.

"The Queen of France must indeed be very ill," said Anne of Austria, "if it is known at the Béguinage of Bruges that she stands in need of being cured."

"Your Majesty, thank God, is not ill beyond remedy."

"But, tell me, how do you happen to know that I am suffering?"

"Your Majesty has friends in Flanders."

"And these friends have sent you?"

"Yes, Madame."

"Name them to me."

"Impossible, Madame, since your Majesty's memory has not been awakened by your heart."

Anne of Austria looked up, endeavoring to discover through the concealment of the mask and through her mysterious language the name of this person who expressed herself with such familiarity and freedom; then suddenly, wearied by a curiosity at odds with her pride, she said, "You are ignorant, perhaps, that royal personages are never spoken to with the face masked."

"Deign to excuse me, Madame," replied the Béguine humbly.

"I cannot excuse you; I will not forgive you if you do not throw your mask aside."

"I have made a vow, Madame, to go to the help of those who are afflicted or suffering, without ever permitting them to behold my face. I might have been able to administer some relief to your body and to your mind; but since your Majesty forbids me, I will take my leave. Adieu, Madame, adieu!"

These words were uttered with a harmony of tone and respect of manner that destroyed the queen's anger and suspicion, but did not remove her feeling of curiosity. "You are right," she said; "it ill becomes those who are suffering to reject the means of relief which Heaven sends them. Speak, then; and may you indeed be able, as you assert you are, to administer relief to my body. Alas! I think that God is about to make it suffer."

"Let us first speak a little of the mind, if you please," said the Béguine, — "of the mind, which I am sure must also suffer."

"My mind?"

"There are cancers so insidious in their nature that their very pulsation is invisible. Such cancers, Madame, leave the ivory whiteness of the skin untouched, and marble not the firm, fair flesh with their blue tints; the physician who bends over the patient's chest hears not, though he listens, the insatiable teeth of the disease grinding its onward progress through the muscles, as the blood flows freely on; neither iron nor fire has ever destroyed or disarmed the rage of these mortal scourges; their home is in the mind, which they corrupt; they grow in the heart until it breaks. Such, Madame, are these other cancers, fatal to queens: are you free from these evils?"

Anne slowly raised her arm, as dazzling in its perfect

whiteness and as pure in its rounded outlines as it was in the time of her earlier days. "The evils to which you allude," she said, "are the condition of the lives of the high in rank upon earth, to whom Heaven has imparted mind. When those evils become too heavy to be borne, the Lord lightens their burden by penitence and confession. Thus we lay down our burden, and the secrets which oppress us. But forget not that the same sovereign Lord apportions their trials to the strength of his creatures; and my strength is not inferior to my burden. For the secrets of others I have enough of the mercy of Heaven; for my own secrets not so much mercy as my confessor."

"I find you, Madame, as courageous as ever against your enemies; I do not find you showing confidence in your friends."

"Queens have no friends. If you have nothing further to say to me, if you feel yourself inspired by Heaven as a prophetess, leave me, I pray; for I dread the future."

"I should have supposed," said the Béguine, resolutely, "that you would rather dread the past."

Hardly had these words escaped the Béguine's lips, when the queen rose proudly. "Speak!" she cried, in a short, imperious tone of voice; "explain yourself briefly, quickly, entirely; or, if not—"

"Nay, do not threaten me, your Majesty!" said the Béguine, gently. "I have come to you full of compassion and respect; I have come on the part of a friend."

"Prove it, then! Comfort, instead of irritating me."

"Easily enough; and your Majesty will see who is friendly to you. What misfortune has happened to your Majesty during these twenty-three years past?"

"Serious misfortunes, indeed! Have I not lost the king?"

"I speak not of misfortunes of that kind. I wish to ask

you if, since — the birth of the king, — any indiscretion on a friend's part has caused your Majesty distress?"

"I do not understand you," replied the queen, setting her teeth hard together in order to conceal her emotion.

"I will make myself understood, then. Your Majesty remembers that the king was born on the 5th of September, 1638, at quarter-past eleven o'clock."

"Yes," stammered the queen.

"At half-past twelve," continued the Béguine, "the dauphin, who had been baptized by Monseigneur de Meaux in the king's and in your own presence, was acknowledged as the heir of the crown of France. The king then went to the chapel of the old Château de St. Germain to hear the *Te Deum* chanted."

"Quite true, quite true," murmured the queen.

"Your Majesty's confinement took place in the presence of Monsieur, his Majesty's late uncle, of the princes, and of the ladies attached to the court. The king's physician, Bouvard, and Honoré, the surgeon, were stationed in the antechamber; your Majesty slept from three o'clock until seven, I believe?"

"Yes, yes; but you tell me no more than every one else knows as well as you and myself."

"I am now, Madame, approaching that with which very few persons are acquainted. Very few persons, did I say? Alas! I might say two only; for formerly there were but five in all, and for many years past the secret has been assured by the deaths of the principal participators in it. The late king sleeps now with his ancestors; Péronne, the midwife, soon followed him; Laporte is already forgotten."

The queen opened her lips as though about to reply; she felt beneath her icy hand, with which she touched her face, the beads of perspiration upon her brow.

"It was eight o'clock," pursued the Béguine. "The king was seated at supper, full of joy and happiness; around him on all sides arose wild cries of delight and drinking of healths; the people cheered beneath the balconies; the Swiss Guards, the Musketeers, and the Royal Guards wandered through the city, borne about in triumph by the drunken students. Those boisterous sounds of the general joy disturbed the dauphin, the future king of France, who was quietly lying in the arms of Madame de Hausac, his nurse, and whose eyes, when he should open them, might have observed two crowns at the foot of his cradle. Suddenly your Majesty uttered a piercing cry, and Dame Péronne immediately flew to your bedside.

"The doctors were dining in a room at some distance from your chamber; the palace, abandoned in the general confusion, was without either sentinels or guards. The midwife, having questioned and examined your Majesty, gave a sudden exclamation of surprise, and taking you in her arms, bewildered, almost out of her senses from sheer distress of mind, despatched Laporte to inform the king that her Majesty the Queen wished to see him in her room.

"Laporte, you are aware, Madame, was a man of the most admirable calmness and presence of mind. He did not approach the king as if he were the bearer of alarming intelligence and feeling his importance wished to inspire the terror which he himself experienced; besides, it was not a very terrifying intelligence which awaited the king. At any rate, Laporte, with a smile upon his lips, approached the king's chair, saying to him, 'Sire, the queen is very happy, and would be still more so to see your Majesty.'

"On that day Louis XIII. would have given his crown away to the veriest beggar for a 'God bless you.' Ani-

mated, light-hearted, and full of gayety, the king rose from the table, and said to those around him, in a tone that Henry IV. might have used, 'Gentlemen, I am going to see my wife.' He came to your bedside, Madame, at the very moment when Dame Péronne presented to him a second prince, as beautiful and healthy as the former, and said, 'Sire, Heaven will not allow the kingdom of France to fall into the female line.' The king, yielding to a first impulse, clasped the child in his arms, and cried, 'Oh, Heaven, I thank thee!'"

At this part of her recital the Béguine paused, observing how intensely the queen was suffering. She had thrown herself back in her chair, and with her head bent forward and her eyes fixed, listened without seeming to hear, and her lips moved convulsively, breathing either a prayer to Heaven or imprecations against the woman before her.

"Ah! do not believe that if there has been but one dauphin in France," exclaimed the Béguine, "if the queen allowed the second child to vegetate far from the throne, — do not believe that she was an unfeeling mother. Oh, no, no! There are those who know the floods of bitter tears she shed; there are those who have known and witnessed the passionate kisses she imprinted on that innocent creature in exchange for the life of misery and gloom to which State policy condemned the twin brother of Louis XIV."

"Oh, Heaven!" murmured the queen, feebly.

"It is known," continued the Béguine, quickly, "that when the king perceived the effect which would result from the existence of two sons, both equal in age and pretensions, he trembled for the welfare of France, for the tranquillity of the State. It is known that the Cardinal de Richelieu, by the direction of Louis XIII., thought over the subject with deep attention, and after an hour's

meditation in his Majesty's cabinet pronounced the following sentence: 'A king is born, to succeed his Majesty. God has sent another, to succeed the first; but at present we need only the first-born. Let us conceal the second from France, as God has concealed him from his parents themselves. One prince is peace and safety for the State; two competitors are civil war and anarchy.'"

The queen rose suddenly from her seat, pale as death, her hands clinched together. "You know too much," she said in a hoarse, thick voice, "since you refer to secrets of State. As for the friends from whom you have acquired this secret, they are false and treacherous. You are their accomplice in the crime which is now committed. Now, throw aside your mask, or I will have you arrested by my captain of the Guards. Do not think that this secret terrifies me! You have obtained it; you shall restore it to me. It will freeze in your bosom; neither your secret nor your life belongs to you from this moment."

Anne of Austria, joining gesture to the threat, advanced two steps towards the Béguine. "Learn," said the latter, "to know and value the fidelity, the honor, and the secrecy of the friends you have abandoned." She then suddenly threw aside her mask.

"Madame de Chevreuse!" exclaimed the queen.

"With your Majesty, the sole living confidante of the secret."

"Ah," murmured Anne of Austria, "come and embrace me, Duchess! Alas! you kill your friend in thus trifling with her terrible distress."

The queen, leaning her head upon the shoulder of the old duchess, burst into a flood of bitter tears. "How young you are still!" said the latter, in a hollow voice; "you can weep!"

CHAPTER LI.

TWO FRIENDS.

The queen looked steadily at Madame de Chevreuse, and said: "I believe you just now made use of the word 'happy' in speaking of me. Hitherto, Duchess, I had thought it impossible that a human creature could anywhere be found less happy than the Queen of France."

"Your afflictions, Madame, have indeed been terrible enough; but by the side of those illustrious misfortunes to which we, two old friends separated by men's malice, were just now alluding, you possess sources of pleasure, slight enough in themselves it may be, but which are greatly envied by the world."

"What are they?" said Anne of Austria, bitterly. "How can you use the word 'pleasure,' Duchess, — you who just now admitted that my body and my mind both are in need of remedies?"

Madame de Chevreuse collected herself for a moment, and then murmured, "How far removed kings are from other people!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that they are so far removed from the vulgar herd that they forget that others ever stand in need of the bare necessaries of life. They are like the inhabitant of the African mountain who gazing from the verdant table-land, refreshed by the rills of melted snow, cannot comprehend that the dwellers in the plains below him are perishing from hunger and thirst in the midst of their lands burned up by the heat of the sun."

The queen slightly colored, for she now began to perceive the drift of her friend's remark. "It was very wrong," she said, "to have neglected you"

"Oh, Madame, the king has inherited, it is said, the hatred his father bore me. The king would dismiss me if he knew I were in the Palais-Royal."

"I cannot say that the king is very well disposed towards you, Duchess," replied the queen; "but I could — secretly, you know — " The duchess's disdainful smile produced a feeling of uneasiness in the queen's mind. "Duchess," she hastened to add, "you did perfectly right to come here."

"Thanks, Madame."

"Even were it only to give us the happiness of contradicting the report of your death."

"Has it been said, then, that I was dead?"

"Everywhere."

"And yet my children did not go into mourning."

"Ah! you know, Duchess, the court is very frequently moving about from place to place; we see the gentlemen of Albert de Luynes but seldom, and many things escape our minds in the midst of the preoccupations which constantly engage us."

"Your Majesty ought not to have believed the report of my death."

"Why not? Alas! we are all mortal; and you may perceive how rapidly I — your younger sister, as we used formerly to say — am approaching the tomb."

"If your Majesty had believed me dead, you ought to have been astonished not to have received any communication from me."

"Death not unfrequently takes us by surprise, Duchess."

"Oh, your Majesty, those who are burdened with secrets such as we have just now discussed have always

an urgent desire to divulge them, which they must gratify before they die. Among the preparations for eternity is the task of putting one's papers in order." The queen started. "Your Majesty will be sure to learn in a particular manner the day of my death."

"Why so?"

"Because your Majesty will receive the next day, under several coverings, everything connected with our mysterious correspondence of former times."

"Did you not burn it?" cried Anne, in alarm.

"Traitors only," replied the duchess, "destroy a royal correspondence."

"Traitors, do you say?"

"Yes, certainly; or rather they pretend to destroy, and keep or sell it. The faithful, on the contrary, most carefully secrete such treasures; for it may happen that some day or other they will wish to seek out their queen in order to say to her: 'Madame, I am getting old; my health is fast failing me. For me there is danger of death; for your Majesty, the danger that this secret may be revealed. Take, therefore, this dangerous paper, and burn it yourself.'"

"A dangerous paper? What one?"

"So far as I am concerned, I have but one, it is true; but that is indeed most dangerous in its nature."

"Oh, Duchess, tell me, tell me!"

"A letter dated Tuesday, the 2d of August, 1644, in which you beg me to go to Noisy-le-Sec to see that unhappy child. In your own handwriting, Madame, there are those words, 'that unhappy child!'"

A profound silence ensued. The queen's mind was wandering in the past; Madame de Chevreuse was watching the progress of her scheme. "Yes, unhappy, most unhappy!" murmured Anne of Austria; "how sad the

existence he led, poor child, to finish it in so cruel a manner!"

"Is he dead?" cried the duchess, suddenly, with a curiosity whose sincere accents the queen instinctively detected.

"He died of consumption, died forgotten, died withered and blighted like the flowers a lover has given to his mistress, which she leaves to die secreted in a drawer where she has hidden them from the world."

"Died?" repeated the duchess, with an air of discouragement which would have afforded the queen the most unfeigned delight had it not been tempered in some measure by a mixture of doubt. "Died — at Noisy-le-Sec?"

"Yes, in the arms of his tutor, — a poor, honest man who did not long survive him."

"That can be easily understood. It is so difficult to bear up under the weight of such a loss and such a secret," said Madame de Chevreuse, the irony of which reflection the queen pretended not to perceive. Madame de Chevreuse continued: "Well, Madame, I inquired some years ago at Noisy-le-Sec about this unhappy child. I was told that it was not believed he was dead; and that was my reason for not at once condoling with your Majesty. Oh, certainly, if I had believed it, never should the slightest allusion to so deplorable an event have reawakened your Majesty's legitimate distress."

"You say that it is not believed that the child died at Noisy?"

"No, Madame."

"What did they say about him, then?"

"They said — But no doubt they were mistaken."

"Nay, speak, speak!"

"They said that one evening about the year 1645 a lady, beautiful and majestic in her bearing, which was

observed notwithstanding the mask and the mantle which concealed her figure, — a lady of rank, of very high rank no doubt, — came in a carriage to the place where the road branches off, — the very same spot, you know, where I awaited news of the young prince when your Majesty was graciously pleased to send me there."

"Well, well?"

"That the boy's tutor, or guardian, took the child to this lady."

"Well, what next?"

"That both the child and his tutor left that part of the country the very next day."

"There! you see there is some truth in what you relate, since in point of fact the poor child died from a sudden attack of illness, which up to the age of seven years makes the lives of all children, as doctors say, suspended as it were by a thread."

"What your Majesty says is quite true. No one knows it better than you; no one believes it more than myself. But yet how strange it is —"

"What can it now be?" thought the queen.

"The person who gave me these details, who had been sent to inquire after the child's health —"

"Did you confide such a charge to any one else? Oh, Duchess!"

"Some one as dumb as your Majesty, as dumb as myself; we will suppose it was myself, Madame. This 'some one,' some months after, passing through Touraine —"

"Touraine!"

"Recognized both the tutor and the child too! I am wrong; he thought he recognized them, both living, cheerful, happy, and flourishing, — the one in a green old age, the other in the flower of his youth. Judge, after that, what truth can be attributed to the rumors which

are circulated, or what faith, after that, can be placed in anything that may happen in the world. But I am fatiguing your Majesty; it was not my intention, however, to do so; and I will take my leave of you, after renewing to you the assurance of my most respectful devotion."

"Stay, Duchess! Let us first talk a little about yourself."

"Of myself, Madame? I am not worthy that you should bend your looks upon me."

"Why not, indeed? Are you not the oldest friend I have? Are you angry with me, Duchess?"

"I, indeed! What motive could I have? If I had reason to be angry with your Majesty, should I have come here?"

"Duchess, age is fast creeping on us both; we should be united against that death whose approach cannot be far off."

"You overpower me, Madame, with the kindness of your language."

"No one has ever loved or served me as you have done, Duchess."

"Your Majesty remembers it?"

"Always. Duchess, give me a proof of your friendship."

"Ah, Madame, my whole being is devoted to your Majesty."

"The proof I require is that you should ask something of me."

"Ask —"

"Oh, I know you well, — no one is more disinterested, more noble, more truly royal."

"Do not praise me too highly, Madame," said the duchess, becoming uneasy.

"I could never praise you as much as you deserve to be praised."

"And yet, age and misfortune effect a great change in people, Madame."

"So much the better; for the beautiful, the haughty, the adored duchess of former days might have answered me ungratefully, 'I do not wish for anything from you.' Blessed be misfortunes, if they have come to you, since they will have changed you, and you will now perhaps answer me, 'I accept.'"

The duchess's look and smile became more gentle; she was under the charm, and no longer concealed her wishes.

"Speak, dearest!" said the queen; "what do you want?"

"I must first explain to you —"

"Do so unhesitatingly."

"Well, then, your Majesty can confer on me a pleasure unspeakable, a pleasure incomparable."

"What is it?" said the queen, a little distant in her manner, from an uneasiness of feeling produced by this remark. "But do not forget, my good Chevreuse, that I am quite as much under my son's influence as I was formerly under my husband's."

"I will not be too hard, Madame."

"Call me as you used to do; it will be a sweet echo of our happy youth."

"Well, then, my dear mistress, my darling Anne —"

"Do you know Spanish still?"

"Yes."

"Ask me in Spanish, then."

"Here it is: Will your Majesty do me the honor to pass a few days with me at Dampierre?"

"Is that all?" said the queen, stupefied.

"Yes."

"Nothing more than that?"

"Good heavens! Can you possibly imagine that in asking you that, I am not asking you the greatest conceivable favor? If that really be the case, you do not know me. Will you accept?"

"Yes, gladly. And I shall be happy," continued the queen, with some suspicion, "if my presence can in any way be useful to you."

"Useful," exclaimed the duchess, laughing, — "oh, no, no! agreeable, delicious, delightful, — yes, a thousand times yes! You promise me, then?"

"I swear it," said the queen, whereupon the duchess seized her beautiful hand and covered it with kisses. The queen could not help murmuring to herself, "She is a good-hearted woman, and very generous too."

"Will your Majesty consent to wait a fortnight before you come?"

"Certainly; but why?"

"Because," said the duchess, "knowing me to be in disgrace, no one would lend me the hundred thousand crowns which I require to put Dampierre in a state of repair. But when it is known that I require that sum for the purpose of receiving your Majesty at Dampierre properly, all the money in Paris will be at my disposal."

"Ah!" said the queen, gently nodding her head with an air of intelligence, "a hundred thousand crowns! you want a hundred thousand crowns to put Dampierre into repair?"

"Quite as much as that."

"And no one will lend them to you?"

"No one."

"I will lend them to you, if you like, Duchess."

"Oh, I hardly dare accept such a sum!"

"You would be wrong if you did not. Besides, a hun-

dred thousand crowns is really not much. I know but too well that your discreetness has never been properly acknowledged. Push that table a little towards me, Duchess, and I will write you an order on M. Colbert, — no, on M. Fouquet, who is a far more courteous and obliging man."

"Will he pay it?"

"If he will not pay it, I will; but it will be the first time he will have refused me."

The queen wrote and handed the duchess the order, and afterwards dismissed her with a warm and cheerful embrace.

CHAPTER LII.

HOW JEAN DE LA FONTAINE WROTE HIS FIRST TALE.

All these intrigues are exhausted; the human mind, so complicated in its exhibitions, has developed itself freely in the three outlines which our recital has afforded. It is not unlikely that in the future we are now preparing, politics and intrigues may still appear; but the springs by which they work will be so carefully concealed that no one will be able to see aught but flowers and paintings, — just as at a theatre, where a Colossus appears upon the scene walking along moved by the small legs and slender arms of a child concealed within the framework.

We now return to St. Mandé, where the superintendent was in the habit of receiving his select society of epicureans. For some time past the host had been severely tried. Every one in the house was aware of and felt the minister's distress. No more magnificent and recklessly improvident *réunions!* Finance had been the pretext assigned by Fouquet; and never was any pretext, as Gourville wittily said, more fallacious, for there was not the slightest appearance of money.

M. Vatel was most resolutely painstaking in keeping up the reputation of the house, and yet the gardeners who supplied the kitchens complained of a ruinous delay. The agents for the supply of Spanish wines frequently sent drafts which no one honored; fishermen, whom the superintendent engaged on the coast of Normandy, calculated that if they were paid all that was due to them, the

amount would enable them to retire comfortably for the rest of their lives; fish, which at a later period was to be the cause of Vatel's death, did not arrive at all. However, on the ordinary day of reception, Fouquet's friends flocked in more numerously than ever. Gourville and the Abbé Fouquet talked over money matters, — that is to say, the abbé borrowed a few pistoles from Gourville. Pellisson, seated with his legs crossed, was engaged in finishing the peroration of a speech with which Fouquet was to open the parliament; and this speech was a masterpiece, because Pellisson wrote it for his friend, — that is to say, he inserted everything in it which the latter would most certainly never have taken the trouble to say of his own accord. Presently Loret and La Fontaine would enter from the garden, engaged in a dispute upon the facility of making verses. The painters and musicians, in their turn, also were hovering near the dining-room. As soon as eight o'clock struck, the supper would be announced; for the superintendent never kept any one waiting. It was already half-past seven, and the guests were in good appetite.

As soon as all the guests were assembled, Gourville went straight up to Pellisson, awoke him out of his reverie, and led him into the middle of a room the doors of which he had closed. "Well," he said, "anything new?"

Pellisson raised his intelligent and gentle face, and said, "I have borrowed twenty-five thousand livres of my aunt, and I have them here in good money."

"Good!" replied Gourville; "we want only one hundred and ninety-five thousand livres for the first payment."

"The payment of what?" asked La Fontaine.

"What! absent-minded as usual? Why, it was you who told us that the small estate at Corbeil was going to be sold by one of M. Fouquet's creditors; and you, also, who proposed that all his friends should subscribe. More

than that, too, it was you who said that you would sell a corner of your house at Château-Thierry in order to furnish your own proportion; and you now come and ask, '*The payment of what*'?"

This remark was received with a general laugh, which made La Fontaine blush. "I beg your pardon," he said, "I had not forgotten it, — oh, no! only — "

"Only you remembered nothing about it," replied Loret.

"That is the truth; and the fact is, he is quite right. There is a great difference between forgetting and not remembering."

"Well, then," added Pellisson, "you bring your mite in the shape of the price of the piece of land you have sold?"

"Sold? no!"

"And have you not sold the field, then?" inquired Gourville, in astonishment, for he knew the poet's disinterestedness.

"My wife would not let me," replied the latter, at which there were fresh bursts of laughter.

"And yet you went to Château-Thierry for that purpose," said some one.

"Certainly I did, and on horseback."

"Poor fellow!"

"I had eight different horses, and I was almost jolted to death."

"You are an excellent fellow! And you rested yourself when you arrived there!"

"Rested! Oh! of course I did, for I had an immense deal of work to do."

"How so?"

"My wife had been flirting with the man to whom I wished to sell the land. The fellow drew back from his bargain, and so I challenged him."

"Very good; and you fought?"

"It seems not."

"You know nothing about it, I suppose?"

"No; my wife and her relations interfered in the matter. I was kept a quarter of an hour with my sword in my hand; but I was not wounded."

"And the adversary?"

"Neither was the adversary, for he never came on to the field."

"Capital!" cried his friends, from all sides; "you must have been terribly angry."

"Exceedingly so; I had caught cold. I returned home, and then my wife began to quarrel with me."

"In real earnest?"

"Yes, in real earnest; she threw a loaf of bread at my head, a large loaf."

"And what did you do?"

"Oh! I upset the table over her and her guests; and then I got upon my horse again, and here I am."

Every one had great difficulty in keeping his countenance at the relation of this tragic comedy; and when the laughter had somewhat ceased, one of the guests present said to him, "Is that all you have brought us back?"

"Oh, no! I have an excellent idea in my head."

"What is it?"

"Have you noticed that there is a good deal of sportive, jesting poetry written in France?"

"Yes, of course," replied every one.

"And," pursued La Fontaine, "only a very small portion of it is printed."

"The laws are strict, you know."

"That may be; but a rare article is a dear article, and that is the reason why I have written a small poem extremely licentious."

"Oh, oh, dear poet!"

"Extremely obscene."

"Oh! oh!"

"Extremely cynical."

"Oh, the devil!"

"Yes," continued the poet, with cold indifference; "I have introduced in it the greatest freedom of language I could possibly employ."

Peals of laughter again broke forth, while the poet was thus announcing the quality of his wares. "And," he continued, "I have tried to exceed everything that Boccaccio, Arétin, and other masters of their craft have written in the same style."

"Good God!" cried Pellisson, "it will be condemned!"

"Do you think so?" said La Fontaine, simply. "I assure you, I did not do it on my own account so much as on M. Fouquet's."

This wonderful conclusion raised the mirth of all present to a climax.

"And I have sold the first edition of this little book for eight hundred livres," exclaimed La Fontaine, rubbing his hands together. "Serious and religious books sell at about half that rate."

"It would have been better," said Gourville, laughing; "to have written two religious books instead!"

"It would have been too long, and not amusing enough," replied La Fontaine, tranquilly. "My eight hundred livres are in this little bag; I offer them as my contribution."

As he said this, he placed his offering in the hands of their treasurer. It was then Loret's turn, who gave a hundred and fifty livres. The others stripped themselves in the same way; and the total sum in the purse amounted to forty thousand livres. Never did more generous coins

rattle in the divine balances in which charity weighs good hearts and good intentions against the counterfeit coin of devout hypocrites.

The money was still being counted over when the superintendent noiselessly entered the room. He had heard everything. This man, who had possessed so many millions, who had exhausted all pleasures and all honors, — this generous heart, this inexhaustible brain, — Fouquet, who had, like two burning crucibles, devoured the material and moral substance of the first kingdom in the world, crossed the threshold with his eyes filled with tears, and passed his white and slender fingers through the gold and silver. "Poor offering," he said, in a tone tender and filled with emotion, "you will disappear in the smallest corner of my empty purse; but you have filled to overflowing that which nothing can ever exhaust, — my heart. Thank you, my friends, — thank you!" And as he could not embrace every one present, — all were weeping a little, philosophers though they were, — he embraced La Fontaine, saying to him, "Poor fellow! so you have on my account been beaten by your wife and damned by your confessor?"

"Oh, it is a mere nothing!" replied the poet. "If your creditors will only wait a couple of years, I shall have written a hundred other tales, which at two editions each will pay off the debt."

CHAPTER LIII.

LA FONTAINE AS A NEGOTIATOR.

FOUQUET pressed La Fontaine's hand most warmly, saying to him, "My dear poet, write a hundred other tales, not only for the eighty pistoles which each of them will produce you, but still more to enrich our language with a hundred other masterpieces."

"Oh! oh!" said La Fontaine, with a little air of pride, "you must not suppose that I have brought only this idea and the eighty pistoles to the superintendent."

"Oh! indeed!" was the general acclamation from all parts of the room; "M. de la Fontaine is in funds to-day."

"Heaven bless the idea, if it brings me one or two millions," said Fouquet, gayly.

"Exactly," replied La Fontaine.

"Quick, quick!" cried the assembly.

"Take care!" said Pellisson in La Fontaine's ear. "You have had a most brilliant success up to the present moment; do not go too far."

"Not at all, M. Pellisson; and you, who are a man of taste, will be the first to approve of what I have done."

"Is it a matter of millions?" said Gourville.

"I have fifteen hundred thousand livres here, M. Gourville," he replied, striking himself on the chest.

"The deuce take this Gascon from Château-Thierry!" cried Loret.

"It is not the pocket you should touch, but the brain," said Fouquet.

"Stay a moment, Monsieur the Superintendent!" added La Fontaine; "you are not procureur-général, —you are a poet."

"True, true!" cried Loret, Conrart, and every person present connected with literature.

"You are, I repeat, a poet and a painter, a sculptor, a friend of the arts and sciences; but acknowledge that you are no lawyer."

"Oh, I do acknowledge it!" replied M. Fouquet, smiling.

"If you were to be nominated at the Academy, you would refuse, I think."

"I think I should, with all due deference to the academicians."

"Very good; if therefore you do not wish to belong to the Academy, why do you allow yourself to form one of the parliament?"

"Oh! oh!" said Pellisson; "we are talking politics."

"I wish to know," persisted La Fontaine, "whether the barrister's gown does or does not become M. Fouquet."

"There is no question of the gown at all," retorted Pellisson, annoyed at the laughter of the company.

"On the contrary, the gown is in question," said Loret.

"Take the gown away from the procureur-général," said Conrart, "and we have M. Fouquet left us still, of whom we have no reason to complain; but as he is no procureur-général without his gown, we agree with M. de la Fontaine, and pronounce the gown to be nothing but a bugbear."

"*Fugiunt risus leporesque*," said Loret.

"The smiles and the graces," said some one present.

"That is not the way," said Pellisson, gravely, "that I translate *lepores*."

"How do you translate it?" said La Fontaine.

"Thus: 'The hares run away as soon as they see M. Fouquet.'"

A burst of laughter, in which the superintendent joined, followed this sally.

"But why hares?" objected Conrart, vexed.

"Because the hare will be the very one who will not be over-pleased to see M. Fouquet retaining the elements of strength which belong to his parliamentary position."

"Oh! oh!" murmured the poets.

"*Quo non ascendam*," said Conrart, "would seem to me impossible with a procureur's gown."

"And it seems so to me without that gown," said the obstinate Pellisson. "What is your opinion, Gourville?"

"I think the gown in question is a very good thing," replied the latter; "but I equally think that a million and a half is far better than the gown."

"And I am of Gourville's opinion," exclaimed Fouquet, stopping the discussion by the expression of his own opinion, which would necessarily bear down all the others.

"A million and a half!" Pellisson grumbled out. "Now I happen to know an Indian fable —"

"Tell it to me," said La Fontaine; "I ought to know it too."

"Tell it, tell it!" said the others.

"There was a tortoise which was as usual well protected by its shell," said Pellisson. "Whenever its enemies threatened it, it took refuge within its covering. One day some one said to it, 'You must feel very hot in such a house as that in the summer, and you are altogether prevented from showing off your graces; here is a snake who will give you a million and a half for your shell.'"

"Good!" said the superintendent, laughing.

"Well, what next?" said La Fontaine, much more interested in the apologue than in its moral.

"The tortoise sold his shell, and remained naked and defenceless. A vulture happened to see him, and being hungry broke the tortoise's back with a blow of his beak and devoured it. The moral is that M. Fouquet should take very good care to keep his gown."

La Fontaine understood the moral seriously. "You forget Æschylus," he said to his adversary.

"What do you mean?"

"Æschylus was bald-headed; and a vulture— your vulture probably — who was a great lover of tortoises mistook at a distance his head for a block of stone, and let a tortoise which was shrunk up in his shell fall upon it."

"Yes, yes, La Fontaine is right," resumed Fouquet, who had become very thoughtful. "Whenever a vulture wishes to devour a tortoise, he well knows how to break his shell; and but too happy is that tortoise to which a snake pays a million and a half for his envelope. If any one were to bring me a generous-hearted snake like the one in your fable, Pellisson, I would give him my shell."

"*Rara avis in terris!*" cried Conrart.

"And like a black swan, is he not?" added La Fontaine; "well, then, the bird in question, black and very rare, is already found."

"Do you mean to say that you have found a purchaser for my post of procureur-général?" exclaimed Fouquet.

"I have, Monsieur."

"But the superintendent has never said that he wished to sell," resumed Pellisson.

"I beg your pardon," said Conrart; "you yourself spoke about it —"

"Yes, I am a witness to that," said Gourville.

"He seems very tenacious about his brilliant idea," said Fouquet, laughing. "Well, La Fontaine, who is the purchaser?"

"A perfect black bird, a counsellor belonging to the parliament, an excellent fellow."

"What is his name?"

"Vanel."

"Vanel!" exclaimed Fouquet, — "Vanel, the husband of —"

"Precisely, — her husband; yes, Monsieur."

"Poor fellow!" said Fouquet, with an expression of great interest; "he wishes to be procureur-général?"

"He wishes to be everything that you have been, Monsieur," said Gourville, "and to do everything that you have done."

"It is very agreeable; tell us all about it, La Fontaine."

"It is very simple. I see him occasionally; and a short time ago I met him walking about on the Place de la Bastille, at the very moment when I was about to take the small carriage to come down here to St. Mandé."

"He must have been watching his wife," interrupted Loret.

"Oh, no!" said La Fontaine; "he is far from being jealous. He accosted me, embraced me, and took me to the inn called L'Image-Saint-Fiacre, and told me all about his troubles."

"He has his troubles, then?"

"Yes; his wife wants to make him ambitious."

"Well, and he told you —"

"That some one had spoken to him about a post in parliament; that M. Fouquet's name had been mentioned; that ever since, Madame Vanel dreams of nothing else but being called Madame the Procureuse-Générale, and that she is dying of it every night she is not dreaming of it."

"The deuce!"

"Poor woman!" said Fouquet.

"Wait a moment! Conrart is always telling me that I

do not know how to conduct matters of business; you will see how I manage this one."

"Well, go on!"

"'I suppose you know,' said I to Vanel, 'that the value of a post such as that which M. Fouquet holds is by no means trifling.' 'How much do you imagine it to be?' he said. 'M. Fouquet, I know, has refused seventeen hundred thousand livres.' 'My wife,' replied Vanel, 'had estimated it at about fourteen hundred thousand.' 'Ready money?' I asked. 'Yes; she has sold some property of hers in Guienne, and has received the purchase-money.'"

"That 's a pretty sum to touch all at once," said the Abbé Fouquet, who had not hitherto said a word.

"Poor Madame Vanel!" murmured Fouquet.

Pellisson shrugged his shoulders. "A fiend!" he said in a low voice to Fouquet.

"That may be; it would be delightful to make use of this fiend's money to repair the injury which an angel has done herself for me."

Pellisson looked with a surprised air at Fouquet, whose thoughts were from that moment fixed upon a fresh object.

"Well!" inquired La Fontaine, "what about my negotiation?"

"Admirable, my dear poet!"

"Yes," said Gourville; "but there are some persons who are anxious to have the steed who have not money enough to pay for the bridle."

"And Vanel would draw back from his offer if he were to be taken at his word," continued the Abbé Fouquet.

"I do not believe it," said La Fontaine.

"What do you know about it?"

"Why, you have not yet heard the *dénouement* of my story."

"If there is a *dénouement*, why do you beat about the bush so much?"

"*Semper ad adventum*. Is that correct?" said Fouquet, with the air of a nobleman who condescends to barbarisms. To this the Latinists present answered with loud applause.

"My *dénouement*," cried La Fontaine, "is that Vanel, that determined blackbird, knowing that I was coming to St. Mandé, implored me to bring him with me, and, if possible, to present him to M. Fouquet."

"So that —"

"So that he is here; I left him in that part of the grounds called Bel-Air. Well, M. Fouquet, what is your reply?"

"Well, it is not fitting that the husband of Madame Vanel should catch cold on my grounds. Send for him, La Fontaine, since you know where he is."

"I will go myself."

"And I will accompany you," said the Abbé Fouquet; "I can carry the money-bags."

"No jesting," said Fouquet, seriously; "let the business be a serious one if it is to be one at all. But, first of all, let us be hospitable. Make my apologies, La Fontaine, to that gentleman, and tell him that I am distressed to have kept him waiting, but that I was not aware he was there."

La Fontaine set off at once, fortunately accompanied by Gourville; for absorbed in his own calculations, the poet would have mistaken the route, and was hurrying as fast as he could towards the village of St. Maur.

Within a quarter of an hour afterwards M. Vanel was introduced into the superintendent's cabinet, the description and details of which have already been given at the beginning of this history. When Fouquet saw him enter,

he called Pellisson, and whispered a few words in his ear: "Do not lose a word of what I am going to say. Let all the silver and gold plate, together with the jewels of every description, be packed up in the carriage. You will take the black horses; the jeweller will accompany you; and you will postpone the supper until Madame de Bellière's arrival."

"Will it be necessary to notify Madame de Bellière?" said Pellisson.

"No, that will be useless; I will do that."

"Very well."

"Go, my friend!"

Pellisson set off, not quite clear as to his friend's meaning or intention, but confident, like every true friend, in the judgment of the man he was blindly obeying. It is that which constitutes the strength of such men; distrust is awakened only by inferior natures.

Vanel bowed lowly to the superintendent, and was about to begin a speech.

"Be seated, Monsieur!" said Fouquet, politely. "I am told that you wish to purchase a post I hold. How much can you give me for it?"

"It is for you, Monseigneur, to fix the price. I know that offers of purchase have already been made to you for it."

"Madame Vanel, I have been told, values it at fourteen hundred thousand livres."

"That is all we have."

"Can you give me the money immediately?"

"I have not the money with me," said Vanel, frightened almost by the unpretending simplicity, amounting to greatness, of the man; for he had expected disputes and difficulties, and opposition of every kind.

"When will you be able to have it?"

"Whenever you please, Monseigneur;" and he began to be afraid that Fouquet was trifling with him.

"If it were not for the trouble you would have in returning to Paris, I would say at once; but we will arrange that the payment and the signature shall take place at six o'clock to-morrow morning."

"Very good," said Vanel, as cold as ice, and feeling quite bewildered.

"Adieu, M. Vanel! Present my humblest respects to Madame Vanel," said Fouquet, as he rose; upon which Vanel, who felt the blood rushing up to his head, for he was quite confounded by his success, said seriously to the superintendent, "Will you give me your word, Monseigneur, upon this affair?"

Fouquet turned round his head, saying, "*Pardieu!* and you, Monsieur?"

Vanel hesitated, trembled all over, and at last finished by hesitatingly holding out his hand. Fouquet opened and nobly extended his own. This loyal hand lay for a moment in Vanel's moist, hypocritical palm; and he pressed it in his own, in order the better to convince himself. The superintendent gently disengaged his hand, as he again said, "Adieu." Vanel then ran hastily to the door, hurried along the vestibules, and fled.

CHAPTER LIV.

MADAME DE BELLIÈRE'S PLATE AND DIAMONDS.

When Fouquet had dismissed Vanel, he began to reflect. He said to himself: "A man never can do too much for the woman he has once loved. Marguerite wishes to be the wife of a procureur-général, and why not confer this pleasure upon her? And now that the most scrupulous and sensitive conscience will be unable to reproach me with anything, let my thoughts be bestowed on the woman who loves me. Madame de Bellière ought to be there by this time;" and he turned towards the secret door.

After Fouquet had locked himself in, he opened the subterranean passage, and rapidly hastened towards the means of communicating between the house at Vincennes and his own residence. He had neglected to apprise his friend of his approach by ringing the bell, perfectly assured that she would never fail to be exact at the rendezvous. In fact, the marchioness had arrived, and was waiting. The noise the superintendent made aroused her; she ran to take from under the door the letter which he had thrust there, and which simply said, "Come, Marchioness; we are waiting supper for you." With her heart filled with happiness, Madame de Bellière ran to her carriage in the Avenue de Vincennes; in a few minutes she was holding out her hand to Gourville, who was standing at the entrance, where, in order the better to please his master, he had stationed himself to watch her arrival. She had not observed that Fouquet's black horses had arrived at

the same time, smoking and covered with foam, having returned to St. Mandé with Pellisson and the very jeweller to whom Madame de Bellière had sold her plate and her jewels. Pellisson introduced the goldsmith into the cabinet, which Fouquet had not yet left. The superintendent thanked him for having been good enough to regard as a simple deposit in his hands the valuable property which he had had every right to sell. He cast his eyes on the total of the account, which amounted to thirteen hundred thousand livres. Then, going to his desk, he wrote an order for fourteen hundred thousand livres, payable at sight, at his treasury, before twelve o'clock the next day.

"A hundred thousand livres' profit!" cried the goldsmith. "Oh, Monseigneur, what generosity!"

"Nay, nay, not so, Monsieur," said Fouquet, touching him on the shoulder; "there are certain kindnesses which can never be repaid. The profit is about that which you would have made; but the interest of your money still remains to be arranged;" and saying this, he unfastened from his sleeve a diamond button, which the goldsmith himself had often valued at three thousand pistoles. "Take this," he said to the goldsmith, "in remembrance of me; and farewell! You are an honest man."

"And you, Monseigneur," cried the goldsmith, completely overcome, "are a grand nobleman!"

Fouquet let the worthy goldsmith pass out of the room by a secret door, and then went to receive Madame de Bellière, who was already surrounded by all the guests. The marchioness was always beautiful, but now her loveliness was dazzling.

"Do you not think, gentlemen," said Fouquet, "that Madame is incomparably beautiful this evening? And do you happen to know why?"

"Because Madame is the most beautiful of women," said some one.

"No; but because she is the best. And yet —"

"Yet?" said the marchioness, smiling.

"And yet, all the jewels which Madame is wearing this evening are nothing but false stones.'

At this remark the marchioness blushed most painfully.

"Oh! oh!" exclaimed all the guests; "that can very well be said of one who has the finest diamonds in Paris."

"Well?" said Fouquet to Pellisson, in a low tone.

"Well, at last I have understood you," returned the latter; "and you have done well."

"That is pleasant," said the superintendent, with a smile.

"Supper is ready, Monseigneur," said Vatel, with majestic air and tone.

The crowd of guests hurried more rapidly than is customary at ministerial entertainments towards the banqueting-room, where a magnificent spectacle presented itself. Upon the buffets, upon the side-tables, upon the supper-table itself, in the midst of flowers and light, glittered most dazzlingly the richest and most costly gold and silver plate that was ever seen, — relics of those ancient magnificent productions which the Florentine artists, whom the Medici family had patronized, had sculptured, chased, and cast for the purpose of holding flowers, at a time when gold yet existed in France. These hidden marvels, which had been buried during the civil wars, had timidly reappeared during the intervals of that war of good taste called the Fronde, — when noblemen, fighting against noblemen, killed but did not pillage one another. All that plate had Madame de Bellière's arms engraved upon it.

"Look!" cried La Fontaine, "here is a P and a B."

But the most remarkable object present was the cover which Fouquet had assigned to the marchioness. Near her

was a pyramid of diamonds, sapphires, emeralds, antique cameos; sardonyx stones, carved by the old Greeks of Asia Minor, with mountings of Mysian gold; curious mosaics of ancient Alexandria, mounted in silver; and massive Egyptian bracelets lay heaped up in a large plate of Palissy ware, supported by a tripod of gilt bronze which had been sculptured by Benvenuto. The marchioness turned pale as she recognized what she had never expected to see again. A profound silence seemed to seize upon every one of the restless and excited guests. Fouquet did not even make a sign in dismissal of the richly liveried servants who crowded like bees round the huge buffets and other tables in the room. "Gentlemen," he said, "all this plate which you behold once belonged to Madame de Bellière, who having observed one of her friends in great distress, sent all this gold and silver, together with the heap of jewels now before her, to her goldsmith. This noble conduct of a devoted friend can well be understood by such friends as you. Happy, indeed, is that man who sees himself loved in such a manner! Let us drink to the health of Madame de Bellière."

A tremendous burst of applause followed his words, and made poor Madame de Bellière sink back dumb and breathless on her seat. "And then," added Pellisson, whom all nobleness aroused and all beauty charmed, "let us also drink to the health of him who inspired Madame's noble conduct; for such a man is worthy of being worthily loved."

It was now the marchioness's turn. She rose, pale and smiling; and as she held out her glass with a faltering hand, and her trembling fingers touched those of Fouquet, her look, full of love, found its reflection and response in that of her ardent and generous-hearted lover.

Begun in this manner, the supper soon became a *fête*.

No one sought for wit, because no one was without it. La Fontaine forgot his Gorgny wine, and allowed Vatel to reconcile him to the wines of the Rhone and those from the shores of Spain. The Abbé Fouquet became so good-natured that Gourville said to him, "Take care, Monsieur the Abbé! If you are so tender, you will be eaten."

The hours passed away so joyously that, contrary to his usual custom, the superintendent did not leave the table before the end of the dessert. He smiled upon his friends, delighted as a man is whose heart becomes intoxicated before his head; and for the first time he looked at the clock. Suddenly a carriage rolled into the courtyard; and, strange to say, it was heard high above the noise of the mirth which prevailed. Fouquet listened attentively, and then turned his eyes towards the antechamber. It seemed as if he could hear a step passing across it, and as if this step, instead of touching the ground, pressed upon his heart. Involuntarily his foot parted company with the foot which Madame de Bellière had rested on his for two hours.

"M. d'Herblay, Bishop of Vannes!" the usher announced; and Aramis's grave and thoughtful face appeared in the door-way, between the remains of two garlands, the thread of which the flame of a lamp had just burned.

CHAPTER LV.

M. DE MAZARIN'S RECEIPT.

FOUQUET would have uttered an exclamation of delight on seeing another friend arrive, if the cold air and constrained appearance of Aramis had not restored all his reserve. "Are you going to join us at our dessert?" he asked. "And yet you would be frightened, perhaps, at the noise we madcaps are making."

"Monseigneur," replied Aramis, respectfully, "I will begin by begging you to excuse me for having interrupted this merry meeting; and then I will beg you to give me, after your pleasure, a moment's audience on matters of business."

As the word "business" had aroused the attention of some of the epicureans present, Fouquet rose, saying, "Business first of all, M. d'Herblay; we are too happy when matters of business arrive only at the end of a meal."

As he said this, Fouquet took the hand of Madame de Bellière, who looked at him with a kind of uneasiness, and then led her to an adjoining salon, after having recommended her to the most reasonable of his guests. And then, taking Aramis by the arm, the superintendent led him towards his cabinet.

Aramis, on reaching the cabinet, forgot respect and etiquette; he threw himself into a chair, saying, "Guess whom I have seen this evening?"

"My dear chevalier, every time you begin in that manner I am sure to hear you announce something disagreeable."

"Well, and this time you will not be mistaken, either, my dear friend," replied Aramis.

"Do not keep me in suspense," added the superintendent, phlegmatically.

"Well, then, I have seen Madame de Chevreuse."

"The old duchess, do you mean?"

"Yes."

"Her ghost, perhaps?"

"No, no; the old she-wolf herself."

"Without teeth?"

"Possibly, but not without claws."

"Well! what harm can she meditate against me? I am no miser, with women who are not prudes. Generosity is a quality that is always prized, even by the woman who no longer dares to provoke love."

"Madame de Chevreuse knows very well that you are not avaricious, since she wishes to draw some money out of you."

"Indeed! under what pretext?"

"Oh, pretexts are never wanting with her! Let me tell you what hers is. It seems that the duchess has a good many letters of M. de Mazarin's in her possession."

"I am not surprised at that, for the prelate was gallant enough."

"Yes; but these letters have nothing whatever to do with the prelate's love-affairs. They concern, it is said, financial matters."

"And accordingly they are less interesting."

"Do you not suspect what I mean?"

"Not at all."

"You have never heard that there was a charge of embezzlement?"

"Yes, a hundred, nay, a thousand times. Since I have been engaged in public matters I have hardly heard any-

thing else but that, — just as in your own case when you, a bishop, are charged with impiety, or a musketeer, with cowardice. The very thing of which they are always accusing ministers of finance is the embezzlement of public funds."

"Very good. But let us specify; for according to the duchess, M. de Mazarin specifies."

"Let us see what he specifies."

"Something like a sum of thirteen million livres, the disposal of which it would be very embarrassing for you to disclose."

"Thirteen millions!" said the superintendent, stretching himself in his arm-chair, in order to enable him the more comfortably to look up towards the ceiling, — "thirteen millions! I am trying to remember them out of all those I have been accused of stealing."

"Do not laugh, my dear monsieur; it is serious. It is certain that the duchess has certain letters in her possession; and these letters must be genuine, since she wished to sell them to me for five hundred thousand livres."

"Oh, one can have a very tolerable calumny for such a sum as that!" replied Fouquet. "Ah! now I know what you mean;" and he began to laugh heartily.

"So much the better," said Aramis, a little reassured.

"I remember the story of those thirteen millions now. Yes, yes, I remember them quite well."

"I am delighted to hear it; tell me about them."

"Well, then, one day Signor Mazarin, Heaven rest his soul! made a profit of thirteen millions upon a concession of lands in the Valtelline; he cancelled them in the registry of receipts, sent them to me, and then made me advance them to him for war expenses."

"Very good; then there is no doubt of their proper disbursement?"

"No; the cardinal placed them under my name, and gave me a receipt."

"You have the receipt?"

"Of course," said Fouquet, as he quietly rose from his chair, and went to his large ebony bureau, inlaid with mother-of-pearl and gold.

"What I most admire in you," said Aramis, with an air of great satisfaction, "is your memory, in the first place; then, your self-possession; and finally, the perfect order which prevails with you, — you, a poet *par excellence.*'

"Yes," said Fouquet, "I am orderly out of a spirit of idleness, to save myself the trouble of looking after things; and so I know that Mazarin's receipt is in the third drawer under the letter M. I open the drawer, and place my hand upon the very paper I need. In the night, without a light, I could find it;" and with a confident hand he felt the bundle of papers which were piled up in the open drawer. "Nay, more than that," he continued, "I remember the paper as if I saw it. It is thick, somewhat crumpled, with gilt edges. Mazarin had made a blot upon the figure of the date. Ah!" he said, "the paper knows we are talking about it, and that we want it very much, and so it hides itself out of the way." As the superintendent looked into the drawer, Aramis rose from his seat. "This is very singular," said Fouquet.

"Your memory is treacherous, my dear monseigneur; look in another drawer."

Fouquet took out the bundle of papers, and turned them over once more; he then became very pale.

"Don't confine your search to that drawer," said Aramis; "look elsewhere."

"Quite useless. I have never made a mistake. No one but myself arranges any papers of mine of this nature; no

one but myself ever opens this drawer, of which, besides, no one but myself is aware of the secret."

"What do you conclude, then?" said Aramis, agitated.

"That Mazarin's receipt has been stolen from me. Madame de Chevreuse was right, Chevalier; I have appropriated the public funds; I have robbed the State coffers of thirteen millions of money; I am a thief, M. d'Herblay."

"Nay, nay; do not get irritated, do not get excited!"

"And why not, Chevalier? Surely there is every reason for it. If the legal proceedings are well arranged, and a judgment is given in accordance with them, your friend the superintendent can follow to Montfaucon his colleague Enguerrand de Marigny and his predecessor Samblançay."

"Oh," said Aramis, smiling, "not so fast!"

"And why not? Why not so fast? What do you suppose Madame de Chevreuse will have done with those letters, — for you refused them, I suppose?"

"Yes; at once. I suppose that she went and sold them to M. Colbert."

"Well?"

"I said I supposed so. I might have said I was sure of it, for I had her followed; and when she left me, she returned to her own house, went out by a back door, and proceeded straight to the intendant's house in the Rue Croix-des-Petits-Champs."

"Legal proceedings will be instituted, then scandal and dishonor will follow; and all will fall upon me like a thunderbolt, blindly, harshly, pitilessly."

Aramis approached Fouquet, who sat trembling in his chair, close to the open drawers; he placed his hand on his shoulder, and in an affectionate tone of voice said, "Do not forget that the position of M. Fouquet can in no way be compared to that of Samblançay or of Marigny."

"And why not, in Heaven's name?"

"Because the proceedings against those ministers were determined, completed, and the sentence carried out; while in your case the same thing cannot take place."

"Another blow! Why not? A peculator is, under any circumstances, a criminal."

"Those criminals who know how to find a safe asylum are never in danger."

"What! Make my escape, — fly?"

"No; I do not mean that. You forget that all such proceedings originate in the parliament; that they are instituted by the procureur-général, and that you are the procureur-général. You see that unless you wish to condemn yourself — "

"Oh!" cried Fouquet suddenly, dashing his fist upon the table.

"Well, what? What is the matter?"

"I am procureur-général no longer."

Aramis at this reply became as livid as death; he pressed his hands together convulsively, and with a wild, haggard look, which almost annihilated Fouquet, said, laying a stress upon every syllable, "You are procureur-général no longer, do you say?"

"No."

"Since when?"

"Since four or five hours ago."

"Take care!" interrupted Aramis, coldly. "I do not think you are in full possession of your senses, my friend; collect yourself!"

"I tell you," returned Fouquet, "that a little while ago some one came to me, brought by my friends, to offer me fourteen hundred thousand livres for the appointment, and that I have sold it."

Aramis looked as if he had been thunder-stricken; the

intelligent and mocking expression of his countenance was changed to an expression of gloom and terror which had more effect upon the superintendent than all the exclamations and speeches in the world. "You had need of money, then?" he said at last.

"Yes; to discharge a debt of honor;" and in a few words he gave Aramis an account of Madame de la Bellière's generosity, and of the manner in which he had thought he ought to repay that generosity.

"Yes," said Aramis; "that is, indeed, a fine trait. What has it cost?"

"Exactly the fourteen hundred thousand livres, — the price of my appointment."

"Which you received in that manner, without reflection. Oh, imprudent friend!"

"I have not yet received the amount; but I shall to-morrow."

"It is not yet completed, then?"

"It must be carried out, though; for I have given the goldsmith, for twelve o'clock to-morrow, an order upon my treasury, into which the purchaser's money will be paid at six or seven o'clock."

"Heaven be praised!" cried Aramis, clapping his hands together; "nothing is yet completed, since you have not been paid."

"But the goldsmith?"

"You shall receive the fourteen hundred thousand livres from me at a quarter before twelve."

"Stay a moment! It is at six o'clock, this very morning, that I am to sign."

"Oh, I tell you that you will not sign!"

"I have given my word, Chevalier."

"If you have given it, you will take it back again; that is all."

"Ah! what are you saying to me?" cried Fouquet, in a most expressive tone. "Fouquet recall his word, after it has been once pledged!"

Aramis replied to the almost stern look of the minister with a look full of anger. "Monsieur," he said, "I believe I have deserved to be called a man of honor, have I not? As a soldier I have risked my life five hundred times; as a priest I have rendered great services, both to the State and to my friends. The value of a word, once passed, is estimated according to the worth of the man who gives it. So long as it is in his own keeping it is of the purest, finest gold; when his wish to keep it has passed away, it is a two-edged sword. With that word, therefore, he defends himself as with an honorable weapon, considering that when he disregards his word,—that man of honor,—he endangers his life; he courts the risk rather than that his adversary should secure advantages. And then, Monsieur, he appeals to Heaven and to justice."

Fouquet bent down his head, as he replied: "I am a poor Breton, opinionated and commonplace; my mind admires and fears yours. I do not say that I keep my word from a moral instinct; I keep it, if you like, by force of habit. But at all events, the ordinary run of men are simple enough to admire this custom of mine. It is my single virtue; leave me the honor of it."

"And so you are determined to sign the sale of the office which would defend you against all your enemies?"

"Yes, I shall sign."

"You will deliver yourself up, then, bound hand and foot, from a false notion of honor, which the most scrupulous casuists would disdain?"

"I shall sign," repeated Fouquet.

Aramis sighed deeply, and looked all round him with the impatient gesture of a man who would gladly dash

something to pieces, as a relief to his feelings. "We have still one means left," he said; "and I trust you will not refuse to make use of that?"

"Certainly not, if it be loyal and honorable, — as everything is, in fact, which you propose."

"I know nothing more loyal than a renunciation of your purchaser. Is he a friend of yours?"

"Certainly; but — "

"'But'! — if you allow me to manage the affair, I do not despair."

"Oh, you shall be absolute master!"

"With whom are you in treaty? What man is it?"

"I am not aware whether you know the parliament?"

"Most of its members. One of the presidents, perhaps?"

"No; only a counsellor — "

"Ah, ah!"

"Who is named Vanel."

Aramis became purple. "Vanel!" he cried, rising abruptly from his seat, — "Vanel! the husband of Marguerite Vanel?"

"Exactly."

"Of your former mistress?"

"Yes, my dear fellow. She is anxious to be Madame the Procureuse-Général. I certainly owed poor Vanel that slight concession; and I am a gainer by it, since I at the same time confer a pleasure on his wife."

Aramis walked straight to Fouquet, and took hold of his hand. "Do you know," he said very calmly, "the name of Madame Vanel's new lover?"

"Ah! she has a new lover, then? I was not aware of it; no, I have no idea what his name is."

"His name is M. Jean Baptiste Colbert; he is intendant of the finances; he lives in the Rue Croix-des-Petits-Champs, where Madame de Chevreuse has this

evening carried Mazarin's letters, which she wishes to sell."

"Gracious Heaven!" murmured Fouquet, passing his hand across his forehead, from which the perspiration was starting.

"You now begin to understand, do you not?"

"That I am lost, — yes."

"Do you now think it worth while to be so scrupulous with regard to keeping your word?"

"Yes," said Fouquet.

"These obstinate people always contrive matters in such a way that one cannot but admire them," murmured Aramis.

Fouquet held out his hand to him; and at the very moment a richly ornamented tortoise-shell clock, supported by golden figures, which was standing on a console table opposite to the fireplace, struck six. The sound of a door opening in the vestibule was heard.

"M. Vanel," said Gourville, at the door of the cabinet, "inquires if Monseigneur can receive him."

Fouquet turned his eyes from those of Aramis and replied, "Let M. Vanel come in."

CHAPTER LVI.

M. COLBERT'S ROUGH DRAUGHT.

VANEL, who entered at this stage of the conversation, was for Aramis and Fouquet the full stop which terminates a sentence. But, for Vanel, Aramis's presence in Fouquet's cabinet had quite another signification. At his first step into the room he fixed upon the delicate yet firm countenance of the Bishop of Vannes a look of astonishment which soon became one of scrutinizing inquiry. As for Fouquet, a true politician, — that is to say, complete master of himself, — he had already, by the energy of his own resolute will, contrived to remove from his face all traces of the emotion which Aramis's revelation had occasioned. He was no longer, therefore, a man overwhelmed by misfortune and reduced to expedients; he held his head proudly erect, and extended his hand with a gesture of welcome to Vanel. He was prime minister; he was in his own house. Aramis knew the superintendent well; the delicacy of the feelings of his heart and the exalted nature of his mind could no longer surprise him. He confined himself, then, for the moment — intending to resume later an active part in the conversation — to the difficult rôle of a man who looks on and listens in order to learn and understand.

Vanel was visibly overcome, and advanced into the middle of the cabinet, bowing to everything and everybody. "I am come," he said.

"You are exact, M. Vanel," returned Fouquet.

"In matters of business, Monseigneur," replied Vanel, "I look upon exactitude as a virtue."

"No doubt, Monsieur."

"I beg your pardon," interrupted Aramis, indicating Vanel with his finger, but addressing himself to Fouquet; "this is the gentleman, I believe, who has come about the purchase of your appointment?"

"Yes, I am," replied Vanel, astonished at the extremely haughty tone with which Aramis had put the question; "but in what way am I to address you, who do me the honor —"

"Call me Monseigneur," replied Aramis, dryly.

Vanel bowed.

"Come, gentlemen," said Fouquet, "a truce to these ceremonies! Let us proceed to business."

"Monseigneur sees," said Vanel, "that I am waiting his pleasure."

"On the contrary, it is I who wait," replied Fouquet.

"What for, may I be permitted to ask, Monseigneur?"

"I thought that perhaps you would have something to say."

"Oh," said Vanel to himself, "he has reflected on the matter, and I am lost!" But resuming his courage he continued, "No, Monseigneur, nothing, — absolutely nothing more than what I said to you yesterday, and which I am ready to repeat now."

"Come, now, tell me frankly, M. Vanel, is not the affair rather a burdensome one for you?"

"Certainly, Monseigneur; fourteen hundred thousand livres is an important sum."

"So important, indeed," said Fouquet, "that I have reflected —"

"You have been reflecting, do you say, Monseigneur?" exclaimed Vanel, anxiously.

"Yes; that you might not yet be in a position to purchase."

"Oh, Monseigneur!"

"Do not make yourself uneasy on that score, M. Vanel! I shall not blame you for a failure in your word, which evidently will be due to inability on your part."

"Oh, yes, Monseigneur, you would blame me, and you would be right in doing so," said Vanel: "for a man must be either imprudent or a fool to undertake engagements which he cannot keep; and I, at least, have always regarded a thing agreed upon as a thing done."

Fouquet colored, while Aramis uttered a "Hum!" of impatience.

"You would be wrong to emphasize such notions as those, Monsieur," said the superintendent: "for a man's mind is variable and full of little caprices, very excusable, and sometimes very worthy of respect; and a man may have wished for something yesterday, and to-day have changed his mind."

Vanel felt a cold sweat trickle down his face. "Monseigneur!" he muttered.

Aramis, who was delighted to find the superintendent carrying on the debate with such clearness and precision, stood leaning his arm upon the marble top of a console table, and began to play with a small gold knife with a malachite handle. Fouquet did not hasten to reply; but after a moment's pause, "Come, my dear M. Vanel," he said, "I will explain to you how I am situated." Vanel began to tremble. "Yesterday I wished to sell —"

"Monseigneur has done more than wish to sell; Monseigneur has sold."

"Well, well, that may be so; but to-day I ask you, as a favor, to restore me my word which I pledged you."

"I received your word as a perfect assurance that it would be kept."

"I know that; and that is the reason why I now entreat you, — do you understand me? — I entreat you to restore it to me."

Fouquet suddenly paused. The words "I entreat you," the force of which he did not immediately perceive, seemed almost to choke him as he uttered it. Aramis, still playing with his knife, fixed a look upon Vanel which seemed to search the inmost recess of his heart.

Vanel simply bowed as he said, "I am overcome, Monseigneur, at the honor you do me to consult me upon a matter of business which is already completed; but — "

"Nay, do not say *but*, dear M. Vanel."

"Alas! Monseigneur, you see," he said, as he opened a large pocket-book, "I have brought the money with me, — the whole sum, I mean. And here, Monseigneur, is the contract of sale which I have just effected of a property belonging to my wife. The order is authentic in every way, the necessary signatures have been attached to it, and it is made payable at sight; it is ready money. In one word, the affair is complete."

"My dear M. Vanel, there is not a matter of business in this world, however important it may be, which cannot be postponed in order to oblige — "

"Certainly," said Vanel, awkwardly.

"To oblige a man who by that means might and would be made a devoted friend."

"Certainly, Monseigneur."

"And the more completely a friend, M. Vanel, in proportion to the importance of the service rendered, since the value of the service he had received would have been so considerable. Well, what do you decide?"

Vanel preserved silence. In the mean time Aramis had

continued his observations. Vanel's narrow face, his deeply sunk orbits, his arched eyebrows, had revealed to the Bishop of Vannes the type of an avaricious and ambitious character. Aramis's method was to oppose one passion by another. He saw Fouquet defeated, demoralized; he threw himself into the contest with new weapons. "Excuse me, Monseigneur," he said; "you forget to show M. Vanel that his own interests are diametrically opposed to this renunciation of the sale."

Vanel looked at the bishop with astonishment; he had hardly expected to find an auxiliary in him. Fouquet also paused to listen to the bishop.

"Do you not see," continued Aramis, "that M. Vanel, in order to purchase your appointment, has been obliged to sell a property which belongs to his wife? Well, that is no slight matter; for one cannot displace fourteen or fifteen hundred thousand livres, as he has done, without considerable loss and very serious inconvenience."

"Perfectly true," said Vanel, whose secret Aramis had with his keen-sighted gaze wrung from the bottom of his heart.

"Such embarrassments," pursued Aramis, "resolve themselves into expenses; and when one has a large disbursement to make, expenses are to be considered."

"Yes, yes," said Fouquet, who began to understand Aramis's meaning.

Vanel remained silent; he, too, had understood him.

Aramis observed his coldness of manner and his silence. "Very good," he said to himself, "you are waiting, I see, until you know the amount; but do not fear! I shall send you such a flight of crowns that you cannot but capitulate on the spot."

"We must offer M. Vanel a hundred thousand crowns at once," said Fouquet, carried away by his generous feelings.

The sum was a good one. A prince, even, would have been satisfied with such a bonus. A hundred thousand crowns at that period was the dowry of a king's daughter.

Vanel, however, did not move.

"He is a rascal!" thought the bishop; "we must offer the five hundred thousand livres at once!" and he made a sign to Fouquet.

"You seem to have spent more than that, dear M. Vanel," said the superintendent. "The price of money is enormous. You must have made a great sacrifice in selling your wife's property. Well, what can I have been thinking of? It is an order for five hundred thousand livres that I am about to sign for you, and even in that case I shall feel that I am greatly indebted to you."

There was not a single gleam of delight or desire on Vanel's face, which remained impassive; not a muscle of it changed in the slightest degree. Aramis cast a look of despair at Fouquet, and then, going straight up to Vanel and taking hold of him by the coat with the gesture used by men of high rank, he said: "M. Vanel, it is neither the inconvenience, nor the displacement of your money, nor the sale of your wife's property even, that you are thinking of at this moment; it is something still more important. I can well understand it; so pay particular attention to what I am going to say."

"Yes, Monseigneur," Vanel replied, beginning to tremble. The fire in the eyes of the prelate scorched him.

"I offer you, therefore, in the superintendent's name, not three hundred thousand livres, nor five hundred thousand, but a million. A million, — do you understand me?" he added, as he shook him nervously.

"A million!" repeated Vanel, as pale as death.

"A million; in other words, at the present rate of interest, an income of seventy thousand livres!"

"Come, Monsieur," said Fouquet, "you can hardly refuse that. Answer! Do you accept?"

"Impossible!" murmured Vanel.

Aramis bit his lips, and something like a white cloud passed over his face. That cloud indicated thunder. He still kept his hold on Vanel. "You have purchased the appointment for fifteen hundred thousand livres, I think? Well, we will give you these fifteen hundred thousand livres; by paying M. Fouquet a visit, and shaking hands with him, you will have become a gainer of a million and a half. You get honor and profit at the same time, M. Vanel."

"I cannot do it," said Vanel, hoarsely.

"Very well," replied Aramis, who had grasped Vanel so tightly by the coat that when he let go his hold Vanel staggered back a few paces, — "very well; one can now see clearly enough your object in coming here."

"Yes," said Fouquet, "one can easily see that."

"But —" said Vanel, attempting to stand erect before the weakness of these two men of honor.

"The fellow presumes to speak!" said Aramis, with the tone of an emperor.

"Fellow?" repeated Vanel.

"The wretch, I meant to say," added the prelate, who had now resumed his usual self-possession. "Come, Monsieur, produce your deed of sale! You should have it there, in one of your pockets, already prepared, as an assassin holds his pistol or his dagger concealed under his cloak."

Vanel began to mutter something.

"Enough!" cried Fouquet. "Where is this deed?"

Vanel tremblingly searched in his pockets, and as he drew out his pocket-book, a paper fell out of it, while Vanel offered the other to Fouquet. Aramis pounced

upon the paper which had fallen out, the handwriting of which he recognized.

"I beg your pardon," said Vanel; "that is a rough draught of the deed."

"I see that very clearly," retorted Aramis, with a smile more cutting than a lash of a whip would have been; "and what surprises me is that this draught is in M. Colbert's handwriting. Look, Monseigneur, look!" And he handed the paper to Fouquet, who recognized the truth of his remark; for, covered with erasures, with inserted words, the margins filled with additions, this deed — an open proof of Colbert's plot — had just revealed everything to its unhappy victim.

"Well!" murmured Fouquet.

Vanel, completely humiliated, seemed as if he were looking for some deep hole where he could hide himself.

"Well!" said Aramis, "if your name were not Fouquet, and if your enemy's name were not Colbert, — if you had to deal only with this mean thief before you, I should say to you, 'Repudiate it!' Such a proof as this absolves you from your word. But these fellows would think you were afraid; they would fear you less than they do; therefore sign, Monseigneur!" and he held out a pen towards him.

Fouquet pressed Aramis's hand; but instead of the deed which Vanel handed to him, he took the rough draught of it.

"No, not that paper," said Aramis, hastily; "this is the one. The other is too precious a document for you to part with."

"No, no!" replied Fouquet. "I will sign upon the paper of M. Colbert; and I write, 'The writing is approved.'" He then signed, and said, "Here it is, M.

Vanel;" and the latter seized the paper, laid down his money, and was about to retreat.

"One moment!" said Aramis. "Are you quite sure the exact amount is there? It ought to be counted over, M. Vanel, particularly since it is money which M. Colbert presents to the ladies. Ah, that worthy M. Colbert is not so generous as M. Fouquet!" and Aramis, spelling every word, every letter of the order to pay, distilled his wrath and his contempt, drop by drop, upon the miserable wretch, who had to submit to this torture for a quarter of an hour. He was then dismissed, not in words, but by a gesture, as one dismisses a beggar or discharges a menial.

As soon as Vanel had gone, the minister and the prelate, their eyes fixed on each other, remained silent for a few moments.

"Well," said Aramis, the first to break the silence, "to what can that man be compared, who, entering into a conflict with an enemy armed from head to foot, thirsting for his life, strips himself, throws down his arms, and sends kisses to his adversary? Good faith, M. Fouquet, is a weapon which scoundrels very frequently make use of against men of honor, and it answers their purpose. Men of honor ought in their turn, also, to make use of bad faith against such scoundrels. You would soon see how strong they would become without ceasing to be men of honor."

"It would be rascally conduct," replied Fouquet.

"Not at all; it would be merely coquetting or playing with the truth. And now, since you have finished with this Vanel, since you have deprived yourself of the happiness of confounding him by repudiating your word, and since you have given up, to be used against yourself, the only weapon which can ruin us —"

"My dear friend," said Fouquet, mournfully, "you are like the teacher of philosophy whom La Fontaine was tell-

ing us about the other day: he saw a child drowning, and began to read him a lecture divided into three heads."

Aramis smiled as he said, "Philosophy, — yes, teacher, — yes; a drowning child, — yes, but a child that can be saved, — you shall see. And, first of all, let us talk about business." Fouquet looked at him with an air of astonishment. "Did you not some time ago speak to me about an idea you had of giving a *fête* at Vaux?"

"Oh," said Fouquet, "that was when affairs were flourishing!"

"A *fête*, I believe, to which the king, without prompting, invited himself?"

"No, no, my dear prelate; a *fête* to which M. Colbert advised the king to invite himself!"

"Ah! exactly, as it would be a *fête* of so costly a character that you would be ruined in giving it?"

"Precisely so. In other times, as I said just now, I had a kind of pride in showing my enemies the fruitfulness of my resources; I felt it a point of honor to strike them with amazement, in creating millions under circumstances where they had imagined nothing but bankruptcies possible. But at the present day I am arranging my accounts with the State, with the king, with myself; and I must now become a mean, stingy man. I shall be able to prove to the world that I can act or operate with my deniers as I used to do with my bags of pistoles; and beginning to-morrow, my equipages shall be sold, my houses mortgaged, my expenses contracted."

"Beginning with to-morrow," interrupted Aramis, quietly, "you will occupy yourself, without the slightest delay, with your *fête* at Vaux, which must hereafter be spoken of with the most magnificent productions of your most prosperous days."

"You are mad, Chevalier d'Herblay."

"I? You do not think that."

"What do you mean, then? Do you not know that a *fête* at Vaux, of the very simplest possible character, would cost four or five millions?"

"I do not speak of a *fête* of the very simplest possible character, my dear superintendent."

"But since the *fête* is to be given to the king," replied Fouquet, who misunderstood Aramis's idea, "it cannot be simple."

"Just so; it ought to be on a scale of the most unbounded magnificence."

"In that case I shall have to spend ten or twelve millions."

"You shall spend twenty if you require it," said Aramis, calmly.

"Where shall I get them?" exclaimed Fouquet.

"That is my affair, Monsieur the Superintendent; and do not be uneasy for a moment about it. The money will be placed at once at your disposal, sooner than you will have arranged the plans of your *fête*."

"Chevalier! Chevalier!" said Fouquet, giddy with amazement, "whither are you hurrying me?"

"Across the gulf into which you were about to fall," replied the Bishop of Vannes. "Take hold of my cloak and throw fear aside!"

"Why did you not tell me that sooner, Aramis? There was a day when with only one million you could have saved me."

"While to-day I can give you twenty," said the prelate. "Such is the case, however. The reason is very simple. On the day you speak of I had not at my disposal the million which you needed, while now I can easily procure the twenty millions we require."

"May Heaven hear you, and save me!"

Aramis smiled, with the singular expression habitual with him. "Heaven never fails to hear me," he said, "perhaps because I pray with a loud voice."

"I abandon myself to you unreservedly," Fouquet murmured.

"No, no; I do not understand it in that manner. It is I who am entirely at your service. Therefore you, who have the clearest, the most delicate, and the most ingenious mind, — you shall have entire control over the *fête*, even to the very smallest details. Only — "

"Only?" said Fouquet, as a man accustomed to appreciate the value of a parenthesis.

"Well, then, leaving the entire invention of the details to you, I shall reserve to myself a general superintendence over the execution."

"In what way?"

"I mean that you will make of me, on that day, a major-domo, a sort of inspector-general, or factotum, — something between a captain of the guard and manager or steward. I will look after the people, and will keep the keys of the doors. You will give your orders, of course; but will give them to no one but to me. They will pass through my lips, to reach those for whom they are intended, — you understand?"

"No, I do not understand."

"But you agree?"

"Of course, of course, my friend."

"That is all I care about, then. Thanks; and now go and prepare your list of invitations."

"Whom shall I invite?"

"Every one."

CHAPTER LVII.

IN WHICH THE AUTHOR THINKS IT IS NOW TIME TO RETURN TO THE VICOMTE DE BRAGELONNE.

Our readers have observed in this history the adventures of the new and of the past generation unrolled, as it were, side by side. To the former, the reflection of the glory of earlier years, the experience of the bitter things of this world; to the former, also, the peace which takes possession of the heart, and the healing of the scars which were formerly deep and painful wounds. To the latter, the conflicts of love and vanity, bitter disappointments and ineffable delights, — life instead of memory. If any variety has been presented to the reader in the different episodes of this tale, it is to be attributed to the numerous shades of color which are presented on this double palette, where two pictures are seen side by side, mingling and harmonizing their severe and pleasing tones. The repose of the emotions of the one is found in the midst of the emotions of the other. After having talked reason with older heads, one likes to share in the wildness of young people. Therefore, if the threads of this story do not seem very intimately to connect the chapter we are now writing with that we have just written, we do not intend to give ourselves any more thought or trouble about it than Ruysdael took in painting an autumn sky after having finished a spring-time scene. We wish our readers to do as much, and to resume Raoul de Bragelonne's story at the very place where our last sketch left him.

In a state of frenzy and dismay, — or rather without reason, without will, without purpose, — Raoul fled heedlessly away after the scene in La Vallière's room. The king, Montalais, Louise, that chamber, that strange exclusion, Louise's grief, Montalais's terror, the king's wrath, — all seemed to indicate some misfortune. But what? He had arrived from London because he had been told of the existence of a danger, and at once this danger showed itself. Was not that sufficient for a lover? Certainly it was; but it was insufficient for a pure and upright heart such as his. And yet Raoul did not seek for explanations in the quarter where all jealous or less timid lovers would have sought them. He did not go straightway to his mistress, and say, "Louise, is it true that you love me no longer? Is it true that you love another?" Full of courage, full of friendship, as he was full of love; a religious observer of his word, and believing the words of others, — Raoul said within himself, "Guiche wrote to put me on my guard; Guiche knows something; I will go and ask Guiche what he knows, and tell him what I have seen."

The journey was not a long one. Guiche, who had been brought from Fontainebleau to Paris within the last two days, was beginning to recover from his wound, and to walk about a little in his room. He uttered a cry of joy as he saw Raoul enter his apartment with the eagerness of friendship. Raoul uttered a cry of grief on seeing De Guiche so pale, so thin, so melancholy. A few words, and a simple gesture which De Guiche made to put aside Raoul's arm, were sufficient to inform the latter of the truth.

"Ah! so it is," said Raoul, seating himself beside his friend; "one loves and dies."

"No, no, not dies," replied Guiche, smiling, "since I am now recovering, and since, too, I can press you in my arms."

"Ah! I understand."

"And I understand you too. You fancy I am unhappy, Raoul?"

"Alas!"

"No; I am the happiest of men. My body suffers, but not my mind or my heart. If you only knew — Oh, I am, indeed, the very happiest of men!"

"So much the better," replied Raoul; "so much the better, provided it lasts."

"It is over. I have had enough happiness to last me to my dying day, Raoul."

"I have no doubt you have had; but she —"

"Listen! I love her, because — But you are not listening to me."

"I beg your pardon."

"Your mind is preoccupied."

"Well, yes; your health, in the first place —"

"It is not that."

"My dear friend, you would be wrong, I think, to ask me any questions, — *you!*" and he laid so much weight upon the "you" that he completely enlightened his friend upon the nature of the evil and the difficulty of remedying it.

"You say that, Raoul, on account of what I wrote to you."

"Certainly. We will talk over that matter a little when you shall have finished telling me of all your own pleasures and pains."

"My dear friend, I am entirely at your service now."

"Thank you. I have hurried, I have flown here, — I came here from London in half the time the government couriers usually take. Now, tell me, my dear friend, what did you want?"

"Nothing whatever, but to make you come,"

"Well, then, I am here."

"All is quite right, then."

"There is still something else, I imagine?"

"No, indeed."

"De Guiche!"

"Upon my honor!"

"You cannot possibly have crushed all my hopes so violently, or have exposed me to being disgraced by the king for my return, which is in disobedience of his orders, — you cannot, in short, have planted jealousy in my heart, merely to say to me, 'It is all right, sleep quietly!'"

"I do not say to you, Raoul, 'Sleep quietly!' But pray understand me, I never will, nor can I indeed, tell you anything else."

"Oh, my friend, for whom do you take me?"

"What do you mean?"

"If you know anything, why conceal it from me? If you do not know anything, why did you warn me?"

"True, true! I was very wrong, and I regret having done so, Raoul. It seems nothing to write to a friend and say, 'Come;' but to have this friend face to face, to feel him tremble and breathlessly wait to hear what one hardly dare tell him — "

"Dare! I have courage enough, if you have not," exclaimed Raoul, in despair.

"See how unjust you are, and how soon you forget you have to do with a poor wounded fellow, — the half of your heart! Calm yourself, Raoul! I said to you, 'Come;' you are here. Ask nothing further of the unhappy De Guiche."

"You summoned me in the hope that I should see with my own eyes, did you not? Nay, do not hesitate, for I have seen all."

"Oh!" exclaimed De Guiche,

"Or at least I thought — "

"There now, you see you are not sure. But if you have any doubt, my poor friend, what remains for me to do?"

"I have seen Louise agitated, Montalais in a state of bewilderment, the king — "

"The king?"

"Yes. You turn your head aside. The danger is there, the evil is there! tell me, is it not so, — it is the king?"

"I say nothing."

"Oh, you say a thousand upon a thousand times more than nothing! Give me facts! for pity's sake, give me proofs! My friend, the only friend I have, speak! My heart is crushed, wounded to death; I am dying from despair."

"If that really be so, my dear Raoul," replied De Guiche, "you relieve me from my difficulty, and I will tell you all, sure that I can tell you nothing but what is consoling, compared to the despair in which I now see you."

"Go on, go on! I am listening."

"Well, then, I can only tell you what you can learn from the first-comer."

"From the first-comer? It is talked about?" cried Raoul.

"Before you say people talk about it, learn what it is that people can talk about. I assure you, solemnly, that people only talk about what may in truth be very innocent; perhaps a walk — "

"Ah! a walk with the king?"

"Yes, certainly, a walk with the king; and I believe the king has very frequently before taken walks with ladies, without on that account — "

"You would not have written to me, shall I say again, if there had been nothing unusual in this promenade?"

"I know that while the storm lasted, it would have been far better if the king had taken shelter somewhere else than to have remained with his head uncovered before La Vallière; but —"

"But?"

"The king is so courteous!"

"Oh, De Guiche, De Guiche, you are killing me!"

"Do not let us talk any more, then."

"Nay; let us continue. This walk was followed by others, I suppose?"

"No — I mean yes; there was the adventure of the oak, I think. But I know nothing about the matter at all." Raoul rose; De Guiche endeavored to imitate him, notwithstanding his weakness. "Well, I will not add another word; I have said either too much or not enough. Let others give you further information if they will, or if they can; my duty was to warn you, and that I have done. Watch over your own affairs now, yourself!"

"Question others? Alas! you are no true friend to speak to me in that manner," said the young man, in utter distress. "The first man I shall question may be either evilly disposed or a fool, — if the former, he will tell me a lie to torment me; if the latter, he will do still worse. Ah! De Guiche, De Guiche, before two hours are over, I shall have been told ten falsehoods, and shall have as many duels on my hands. Save me, then! Is it not best to know one's whole misfortune?"

"But I know nothing, I tell you. I was wounded, in a fever; my senses were gone, and I have only effaced impressions of it all. But there is no reason why we

should search very far, when the very man we want is close at hand. Is not D'Artagnan your friend?"

"Oh, true, true!"

"Go to him, then. He will throw light on the subject and without seeking to injure your eyes."

At this moment a lackey entered the room. "What is it?" said De Guiche.

"Some one is waiting for Monseigneur in the Cabinet des Porcelaines."

"Very well. Will you excuse me, my dear Raoul? I am so proud since I have been able to walk again."

"I would offer you my arm, De Guiche, if I did not guess that the person in question is a lady."

"I believe so," said De Guiche, smiling, as he quitted Raoul.

Raoul remained motionless, absorbed, overwhelmed, like the miner upon whom a vault has just fallen in: he is wounded, his life-blood is welling fast, his thoughts are confused; he endeavors to recover himself, and to save his life and his reason. A few minutes were all Raoul needed to dissipate the bewildering sensations which had been occasioned by these two revelations. He had already recovered the thread of his ideas, when suddenly through the door he fancied he recognized Montalais's voice in the Cabinet des Porcelaines. "She!" he cried. "Yes; it is indeed her voice! Oh! here is a woman who can tell me the truth; but shall I question her here? She conceals herself even from me; she is coming, no doubt, from Madame. I will see her in her own apartment. She will explain her alarm, her flight, the strange manner in which I was driven out; she will tell me all that, — after M. d'Artagnan, who knows everything, shall have given me fresh strength and courage. Madame — a coquette, I fear, and yet a coquette who is herself in love — has her

moments of kindness; a coquette who is as capricious and uncertain as life or death, but who causes De Guiche to say that he is the happiest of men. He at least is lying on roses." And so he hastily quitted the count's apartments; and reproaching himself as he went for having talked of nothing but his own affairs to De Guiche, he arrived at D'Artagnan's quarters.

CHAPTER LVIII.

BRAGELONNE CONTINUES HIS INQUIRIES.

THE captain was sitting buried in his leathern arm-chair, his spur fixed in the floor, his sword between his legs, and was occupied in reading a great number of letters, as he twisted his mustache. D'Artagnan uttered a welcome full of pleasure when he perceived his friend's son. "Raoul, my boy," he said, "by what lucky accident does it happen that the king has recalled you?"

These words did not sound over-agreeably in the young man's ears, who as he seated himself replied, "Upon my word, I cannot tell you; all that I know is that I have come back."

"Hum!" said D'Artagnan, folding up his letters and directing a look full of meaning at him. "What do you say, my boy? — that the king has not recalled you, and that you have returned? I do not at all understand that."

Raoul was already pale enough, and he began to turn his hat round and round in his hand with an air of constraint.

"What the deuce is the matter, that you look as you do, and what makes you so dumb?" said the captain. "Do people catch that fashion in England? I have been in England, and came back again as lively as a chaffinch. Will you not say something?"

"I have too much to say."

"Ah! ah! how is your father?"

"Forgive me, my dear friend; I was going to ask you that."

D'Artagnan increased the sharpness of his penetrating gaze, which no secret was capable of resisting. "You are unhappy about something," he said.

"I am, indeed; and you know very well what, M. d'Artagnan."

"I?"

"Of course. Nay, do not pretend to be astonished."

"I am not pretending to be astonished, my friend."

"Dear captain, I know very well that in all trials of *finesse*, as well as in all trials of strength, I shall be beaten by you. You can see that at the present moment I am an idiot, a fool. I have neither head nor arm; do not despise, but help me. In a few words, I am the most wretched of living beings."

"Oh! oh! why that?" inquired D'Artagnan, unbuckling his belt and softening the ruggedness of his smile.

"Because Mademoiselle de la Vallière is deceiving me."

"She is deceiving you?" said D'Artagnan, not a muscle of whose face had moved. "Those are big words. Who makes use of them?"

"Every one."

"Ah! if every one says so, there must be some truth in it. I begin to believe there is fire when I see the smoke. It is ridiculous, perhaps, but so it is."

"Therefore you do believe?" exclaimed Bragelonne, quickly.

"I never mix myself up in affairs of that kind; you know that very well."

"What! not for a friend, for a son?"

"Exactly. If you were a stranger, I should tell you — I should tell you nothing at all. How is Porthos, do you know?"

"Monsieur," cried Raoul, pressing D'Artagnan's hand, "I entreat you, in the name of the friendship you have vowed to my father!"

"The deuce take it, you are really ill — from curiosity."

"No, it is not from curiosity; it is from love."

"Good! Another grand word! If you were really in love, my dear Raoul, you would be very different."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that if you were so deeply in love that I could believe I was addressing myself to your heart — But it is impossible."

"I tell you I love Louise to distraction."

D'Artagnan could read to the very bottom of the young man's heart.

"Impossible, I tell you," he said. "You are like all young men, — you are not in love, you are out of your senses."

"Well, suppose it were only that?"

"No sensible man ever succeeded in making much of a brain when the head was turned. I have lost my bearings in the same way a hundred times in my life. You would listen to me, but you would not hear me; you would hear, but you would not understand me; you would understand, but you would not obey me."

"Oh, try, try!"

"I say more. Even if I were unfortunate enough to know something, and foolish enough to communicate it to you — You are my friend, you say?"

"Indeed, yes."

"Very good. I should quarrel with you. You would never forgive me for having destroyed your illusion, as people say of love-affairs."

"M. d'Artagnan, you know all; and yet you plunge me in perplexity, in despair, in death."

"There, there!"

"I never complain, as you know; but as Heaven and my father would never forgive me for blowing out my brains, I will go and get the first person I meet to give me the information which you withhold; I will tell him he lies, and —"

"And you will kill him? A fine affair that would be! So much the better. What should I care for it? Kill my boy, kill, if it can give you any pleasure. It is exactly like a man with the toothache, who keeps on saying, 'Oh, what torture I am suffering! I could bite iron.' My answer always is, 'Bite, my friend, bite; the tooth will remain all the same.'"

"I shall not kill any one, Monsieur," said Raoul, gloomily.

"Yes, yes; you fellows of to-day put on those airs. Instead of killing, you will get killed yourself, I suppose you mean? Very fine indeed! How much I should regret you! I should say all day long: 'Ah! what a high-flown simpleton that Bragelonne was, — doubly an ingrate! I have passed my whole life almost in teaching him how to hold his sword properly, and the silly fellow has got himself spitted like a lark.' Go, then, Raoul, go and get yourself disposed of, if you like. I don't know who taught you logic; but, God damn me, — as the English say, — whoever it was, Monsieur, has stolen your father's money."

Raoul buried his face in his hands, murmuring, "No, no; I have not a single friend in the world!"

"Oh, bah!" said D'Artagnan.

"I meet with nothing but raillery or indifference."

"Idle fancies, Monsieur! I do not laugh at you, although I am a Gascon. And as for being indifferent, if I were so I should have sent you to all the devils a quarter

of an hour ago; for you would sadden a man who was wild with joy, and would kill one who was sad. How now, young man! Do you wish me to disgust you with the girl to whom you are attached, and to teach you to execrate women, who are the honor and happiness of human life?"

"Oh, tell me, Monsieur, and I will bless you!"

"Do you think, my dear fellow, that I can have crammed into my brain all that business about the carpenter and the painter and the staircase and the portrait, and a hundred other tales to sleep over?"

"A carpenter! what do you mean?"

"Upon my word, I don't know. Some one told me there was a carpenter who made an opening through a floor."

"In La Vallière's room?"

"Oh, I don't know where!"

"In the king's apartment, perhaps?"

"Of course! If it were in the king's apartment, I should tell you, I suppose."

"In whose room, then?"

"I have told you for the last hour that I know nothing of the whole affair."

"But the painter, then, — the portrait?"

"It seems that the king wished to have the portrait of one of the ladies belonging to the court."

"La Vallière's?"

"Why, you seem to have only that name in your mouth! Who spoke to you of La Vallière?"

"If it be not her portrait, then, why do you suppose it would concern me?"

"I do not suppose it will concern you. But you ask me all sorts of questions, and I answer you; you wish to know the current scandal, and I tell you. Make the best you can of it!"

Raoul struck his forehead with his hand, in utter despair. "It will kill me!" he said.

"So you have said already."

"Yes, you 're right;" and he made a step or two as if he were going to leave.

"Where are you going?"

"To find some one who will tell me the truth."

"Who is that?"

"A woman."

"Mademoiselle de la Vallière herself, I suppose you mean?" said D'Artagnan, with a smile. "Ah, a famous idea that! You wish to be consoled by some one, and you will be so at once. She will tell you nothing ill of herself, of course. So be off!"

"You are mistaken, Monsieur," replied Raoul; "the woman I mean will tell me all the evil she possibly can."

"Montalais, I 'll wager."

"Yes, Montalais."

"Ah! her friend, — a woman who in that capacity will exaggerate all that is either bad or good in the matter. Do not talk to Montalais, my good Raoul."

"You have some reason for wishing me not to talk with Montalais?"

"Well, I admit it. And, in point of fact, why should I play with you as a cat does with a poor mouse? You distress me, — you do indeed. And if I wish you not to speak to Montalais just now, it is because you will be betraying your secret, and people will take advantage of it. Wait, if you can!"

"I cannot."

"So much the worse. Why, you see, Raoul, if I had an idea — but I have not got one."

"Promise that you will pity me, my friend, — that is all I need, — and leave me to get out of the affair by myself."

"Oh, yes, indeed, in order that you may get deeper into the mire! A capital idea, truly! Go and sit down at that table and take a pen in your hand."

"What for?"

"To write to ask Montalais to give you an interview."

"Ah!" said Raoul, snatching eagerly at the pen which the captain held out to him.

Suddenly the door opened; and one of the musketeers, approaching D'Artagnan, said, "Captain, Mademoiselle de Montalais is here, and wishes to speak to you."

"To me?" murmured D'Artagnan. "Ask her to come in. I shall soon see," he said to himself, "whether she wishes to speak to me or not."

The cunning captain was quite right in his suspicions; for as soon as Montalais entered, she exclaimed, "Oh, Monsieur! Monsieur! — I beg your pardon, M. d'Artagnan."

"Oh, I forgive you, Mademoiselle," said D'Artagnan; "I know that at my age those who look for me have great need of me."

"I was looking for M. de Bragelonne," replied Montalais.

"How very fortunate that is! He was looking for you too. Raoul, will you accompany Mademoiselle Montalais?"

"Oh, certainly!"

"Go along, then," he said, as he gently pushed Raoul out of the cabinet; and then taking hold of Montalais's hand, he said in a low voice, "Be kind towards him; spare him, and spare her too, if you can."

"Ah!" she said in the same tone of voice, "it is not I who will speak to him."

"Who, then?"

"It is Madame who has sent for him."

"Very good," cried D'Artagnan; "it is Madame, is it? In an hour's time, then, the poor fellow will be cured."

"Or else dead," said Montalais, in a voice full of compassion. "Adieu, M. d'Artagnan!" she said; and she ran to join Raoul, who was waiting for her at a little distance from the door, very much puzzled and uneasy at the dialogue, which promised no good to him.

CHAPTER LIX.

TWO JEALOUSIES.

Lovers are very tender towards everything which concerns the person with whom they are in love. Raoul no sooner found himself alone with Montalais than he kissed her hand with rapture. "There, there," said the young girl, sadly, "you are throwing your kisses away; I will guarantee that they will not bring you back any interest."

"How so? Why? Will you explain to me, my dear Aure?"

"Madame will explain everything to you. I am going to take you to her apartments."

"What!"

"Silence! and throw aside your wild and savage looks. The windows here have eyes; the walls have ears. Have the kindness not to look at me any longer; be good enough to speak to me aloud of the rain, of the fine weather, and of the charms of England."

"At all events —" interrupted Raoul.

"I tell you, I warn you, that somewhere, I know not where, Madame is sure to have eyes and ears open. I am not very desirous, you can easily believe, to be dismissed or thrown into the Bastille. Let us talk, I tell you; or rather, do not let us talk at all."

Raoul clinched his hands, and assumed the look and gait of a man of courage, but of a man of courage on his way to the torture. Montalais, glancing in every direction, walking along with an easy swinging gait, and hold-

ing up her head pertly in the air, preceded him to Madame's apartments, where he was at once introduced. "Well," he thought, "this day will pass away without my learning anything. De Guiche had too much consideration for my feelings. He has no doubt an understanding with Madame; and both of them, by a friendly plot, have agreed to postpone the solution of the problem. Why have I not here a good enemy, — that serpent De Wardes, for instance? That he would bite is very likely; but I should not hesitate any more. To hesitate, to doubt, — better by far to die!"

Raoul was in Madame's presence. Henrietta, more charming than ever, was half lying, half reclining in her arm-chair, her little feet upon an embroidered velvet cushion; she was playing with a little kitten with long silky fur, which was biting her fingers and hanging by the lace of her collar.

Madame was thinking; she was thinking profoundly. It required both Montalais's and Raoul's voice to disturb her from her reverie.

"Your Highness sent for me?" repeated Raoul.

Madame shook her head, as if she were just awakening, and then said: "Good-morning, M. de Bragelonne. Yes, I sent for you. So you have returned from England?"

"Yes, Madame, and I am at your royal Highness's commands."

"Thank you. Leave us, Montalais!" and the latter immediately left the room.

"You have a few minutes to give me, M. de Bragelonne, have you not?"

"All my life is at your royal Highness's disposal," Raoul returned, with respect, guessing that there was something serious under all these outward courtesies of Madame; nor was he displeased, indeed, to observe the

seriousness of her manner, feeling persuaded that there was some sort of affinity between Madame's sentiments and his own. In fact, every one at court of any perception at all well knew the capricious fancy and absurd despotism of the princess's singular character. Madame had been flattered beyond all bounds by the king's attentions; she had made herself talked about; she had inspired the queen with that mortal jealousy which is the gnawing worm at the root of every woman's happiness. Madame, in a word, in her attempts to cure a wounded pride, had found that her heart had become deeply and passionately attached.

We know what Madame had done to recall Raoul, who had been sent out of the way by Louis XIV. Raoul did not know of her letter to Charles II., although D'Artagnan had guessed its contents. Who will undertake to account for that seemingly inexplicable mixture of love and vanity, that passionate tenderness of feeling, that prodigious duplicity of conduct? No one can, indeed; not even the bad angel who kindles the love of coquetry in the heart of woman.

"M. de Bragelonne," said the princess, after a moment's pause, "have you returned satisfied?"

Bragelonne looked at Madame Henrietta, and seeing how pale she was, from what she was keeping back, from what she was burning to disclose, replied: "Satisfied? What is there for me to be satisfied or dissatisfied about, Madame?"

"But what are those things with which a man of your age and of your appearance is usually either satisfied or dissatisfied?"

"How eager she is!" thought Raoul, terrified. "What is it that she is going to breathe into my heart?" and then, frightened at what she might possibly be going to

tell him, and wishing to put off the moment so wished for but so dreadful, when he should learn all, he replied, "I left behind me, Madame, a dear friend in good health, and on my return I find him very ill."

"You refer to M. de Guiche," replied Madame Henrietta, with the most imperturbable self-possession; "I have heard he is a very dear friend of yours."

"He is, indeed, Madame."

"Well, it is quite true he has been wounded; but he is better now. Oh, M. de Guiche is not to be pitied!" she said hurriedly; and then, recovering herself, added, "But has he anything to complain of? Has he complained of anything? Is there any cause of grief or sorrow with which we are not acquainted?"

"I allude only to his wound, Madame."

"So much the better, then, for in other respects M. de Guiche seems to be very happy, — he is always in very high spirits. I am sure that you, M. de Bragelonne, would far prefer to be, like him, wounded only in the body, — for what, indeed, is such a wound, after all?"

Raoul started. "Alas!" he said to himself, "she is returning to it." He made no reply.

"What did you say?" she inquired.

"I did not say anything, Madame."

"You did not say anything. You disapprove of my observation, then. You are perfectly satisfied, I suppose?"

Raoul approached closer to her. "Madame," he said, "your royal Highness wishes to say something to me, and your instinctive kindness and generosity of disposition induce you to be careful and considerate as to your manner of conveying it. Will your royal Highness throw this kind forbearance aside? I am strong, and I am listening."

"Ah!" replied Henrietta, "what do you understand, then?"

"That which your royal Highness wishes me to understand," said Raoul, trembling, notwithstanding his command over himself, as he pronounced these words.

"In point of fact," murmured the princess, "it seems cruel; but since I have begun —"

"Yes, Madame, since your Highness has deigned to begin, will you deign to finish —"

Henrietta rose hurriedly, and walked a few paces up and down her room. "What did M. de Guiche tell you?" she said suddenly.

"Nothing, Madame."

"Nothing! Did he say nothing? Ah, how well I recognize him in that!"

"No doubt he wished to spare me."

"And that is what friends call friendship. But surely M. d'Artagnan, whom you have just left, must have told you."

"No more than De Guiche, Madame."

Henrietta made a gesture full of impatience, as she said, "At least, you know all that the court has known?"

"I know nothing at all, Madame."

"Not the scene in the storm?"

"Not the scene in the storm."

"Not the *tête-à-tête* in the forest?"

"Not the *tête-à-tête* in the forest."

"Nor the flight to Chaillot?"

Raoul, whose head drooped like the flower which has been cut down by the sickle, made an almost superhuman effort to smile as he replied with the greatest gentleness: "I have had the honor to tell your royal Highness that I am absolutely ignorant of everything, — that I am a poor unremembered outcast, who has this moment arrived from England. There have been so many stormy waves between myself and those whom I left behind me here, that

the rumor of none of the circumstances your Highness refers to has been able to reach me."

Henrietta was affected by his extreme pallor, his gentleness, and his great courage. The principal feeling in her heart at that moment was an eager desire to hear the nature of the remembrance which the poor lover retained of her who had made him suffer so much. "M. de Bragelonne," she said, "that which your friends have refused to do, I will do for you, whom I like and esteem. I will be your friend. You hold your head high, as a man of honor should do; and I should regret that you should have to bow it down under ridicule, and in a few days, it may be, under contempt."

"Ah!" exclaimed Raoul, perfectly livid. "Has it already gone so far?"

"If you do not know," said the princess, "I see that you guess; you were affianced, I believe, to Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"Yes, Madame."

"By that right, then, you deserve to be warned about her, as some day or other I shall be obliged to dismiss her from my service —"

"Dismiss La Vallière!" cried Bragelonne.

"Of course! Do you suppose that I shall always be accessible to the tears and protestations of the king? No, no; my house shall no longer be made a convenience for such practices. But you tremble!"

"No, Madame, no," said Bragelonne, making an effort over himself. "I thought I should have died just now; that was all. Your royal Highness did me the honor to say that the king wept and implored you —"

"Yes; but in vain," returned the princess, who then related to Raoul the scene that took place at Chaillot, and the king's despair on his return. She told him of his in-

dulgence to herself, and the terrible word with which the outraged princess, the humiliated coquette, had dashed aside the royal anger.

Raoul bowed his head.

"What do you think of it all?" she said.

"The king loves her," he replied.

"But you seem to think she does not love him!"

"Alas, Madame, I still think of the time when she loved me."

Henrietta was for a moment struck with admiration at this sublime disbelief; and then, shrugging her shoulders, she said: "You do not believe me, I see. Oh, how deeply you love her! And you doubt if she loves the king?"

"Until I have proof. Pardon! I have her word, you see; and she is a noble child."

"You require a proof? Be it so! Come with me."

CHAPTER LX.

A DOMICILIARY VISIT.

THE princess, preceding Raoul, led him through the court-yard towards that part of the building which La Vallière inhabited; and ascending the same staircase which Raoul had himself ascended that very morning, she paused at the door of the room in which the young man had been so strangely received by Montalais. The opportunity had been well chosen to carry out the project which Madame Henrietta had conceived, for the château was empty. The king, the courtiers, and the ladies of the court had set off for St. Germain; Madame Henrietta alone, aware of Bragelonne's return, and thinking over the advantages which might be drawn from this return, had feigned indisposition in order to remain behind. Madame was therefore confident of finding La Vallière's room and Saint-Aignan's apartment unoccupied. She took a pass-key from her pocket, and opened the door of her maid-of-honor's room. Bragelonne's gaze was immediately fixed upon the interior of the room, which he recognized at once; and the impression which the sight of it produced upon him was one of the first tortures that had awaited him. The princess looked at him, and her practised eye could at once detect what was passing in the young man's heart.

"You asked me for proofs," she said; "do not be astonished, then, if I give you them. But if you do not think you have courage enough to confront them, there is still time to withdraw."

"I thank you, Madame," said Bragelonne; "but I came here to be convinced. You promised to convince me; do so."

"Enter, then," said Madame, "and shut the door behind you."

Bragelonne obeyed, and then turned towards the princess, whom he interrogated by a look.

"You know where you are, I suppose?" inquired Madame Henrietta.

"Everything leads me to believe that I am in Mademoiselle de la Vallière's room."

"You are."

"But I would observe to your Highness that this room is a room, and is not a proof."

"Wait," said the princess, as she walked to the foot of the bed, folded up the screen into its several compartments, and stooped down towards the floor. "Look here," she continued; "stoop down, and lift up this trap-door."

"A trap-door!" said Raoul, astonished; for D'Artagnan's words recurred to his mind, and he remembered that D'Artagnan had made vague use of that word. He looked in vain for some cleft or crevice which might indicate an opening, or a ring to assist in lifting up some portion of the planking.

"Ah! that is true," said Madame Henrietta, smiling; "I forgot the secret spring, —the fourth plank of the flooring. Press on the spot where you will observe a knot in the wood. Those are the instructions. Press, Viscount! press, I say, yourself!"

Raoul, pale as death, pressed his finger on the spot which had been indicated to him; at the same moment the spring began to work, and the trap rose of its own accord.

"It is very ingenious, certainly," said the princess; "and one can see that the architect foresaw that it would be a small hand which would have to employ that device. See how easily the trap-door opens without assistance!"

"A staircase!" cried Raoul.

"Yes; and a very pretty one too," said Madame Henrietta. "See, Viscount, the staircase has a balustrade, intended to prevent the falling of timid persons, who might be tempted to descend; and I will risk myself on it accordingly. Come, Viscount, follow me!"

"But before following you, Madame, may I ask whither this staircase leads?"

"Ah! true; I forgot to tell you. You know, perhaps, that formerly M. de Saint-Aignan lived in the very next apartment to the king's?"

"Yes, Madame, I am aware of that, — that was the arrangement, at least, before I left; and more than once I have had the honor of visiting him in his old rooms."

"Well, he obtained the king's leave to change that convenient and beautiful apartment for the two rooms to which this staircase will conduct us, and which together form a lodging for him twice as small and at ten times greater distance from the king, — a close proximity to whom is by no means disdained, in general, by the gentlemen belonging to the court."

"Very good, Madame," returned Raoul; "but go on, I beg, for I do not yet understand."

"Well, then, it accidentally happened," continued the princess, "that M. de Saint-Aignan's apartment is situated underneath the apartments of my maids of honor, and particularly underneath the room of La Vallière."

"But what was the motive of this trap-door and this staircase?"

"That I cannot tell you. Would you like to go down

to M. de Saint-Aignan's rooms? Perhaps we shall there find the solution of the enigma."

Madame set the example by going down herself; and Raoul, sighing deeply, followed her. At every step Bragelonne took, he advanced farther into that mysterious apartment which had been witness to La Vallière's sighs, and still retained the sweetest perfume of her presence. Bragelonne fancied that he perceived, as he inhaled his every breath, that the young girl must have passed through there. Then succeeded to these emanations of herself, which he regarded as invisible though certain proofs, the flowers she preferred to all others, the books of her own selection. Had Raoul preserved a single doubt on the subject, it would have vanished at the secret harmony of tastes and disposition of the mind shown in the things of common use. La Vallière, in Bragelonne's eyes, was present there in every article of furniture, in the color of the hangings, in everything that surrounded him. Dumb, and completely overwhelmed, there was nothing further for him now to learn, and he followed his pitiless conductress as blindly as the culprit follows the executioner. Madame, as cruel as all women of delicate and nervous temperaments are, did not spare him the slightest detail. But it must be admitted that notwithstanding the kind of apathy into which he had fallen, none of these details, even had he been left alone, would have escaped him. The happiness of the woman who loves, when that happiness is derived from a rival, is a torture for a jealous man; but for a jealous man such as Raoul was, for that heart which for the first time was steeped in gall and bitterness, Louise's happiness was in reality an ignominious death, a death of body and soul. He divined all, —their hands clasped in each other's, their faces drawn close together, and reflected, side by side, in loving prox-

imity, as they gazed upon the mirrors around them, — so sweet an occupation for lovers, who, as they thus see themselves twice over, impress the picture more enduringly in their memories. He divined the kiss unseen behind the heavy curtains falling free of their bands. He translated into feverish pains the eloquence of the couches hid in their shadow. That luxury, that studied elegance, full of intoxication; that extreme care to spare the loved object every annoyance or to occasion her a delightful surprise; that strength and power of love multiplied by the strength and power of royalty itself, — struck Raoul a mortal blow. Oh, if there be anything which can assuage the tortures of jealousy, it is the inferiority of the man who is preferred to yourself; while, on the very contrary, if there be a hell within hell, a torture without name in language, it is the almightiness of a god placed at the disposal of a rival, together with youth, beauty, and grace. In moments such as these, God himself seems to have taken part against the rejected lover.

One final pang was reserved for poor Raoul. Madame Henrietta lifted a silk curtain, and behind the curtain he perceived La Vallière's portrait. Not only the portrait of La Vallière, but of La Vallière eloquent of youth, beauty, and happiness, inhaling life and enjoyment at every pore, because at eighteen years of age love itself is life.

"Louise!" murmured Bragelonne, "Louise! is it true, then? Oh, you have never loved me, for never have you looked at me in that manner!" and he felt as if his heart were crushed within his bosom.

Madame Henrietta looked at him, almost envious of his extreme grief, although she well knew there was nothing to envy in it, and that she herself was as passionately loved by De Guiche as Louise by Bragelonne. Raoul interpreted Madame Henrietta's look.

"Oh, forgive me, forgive me, Madame! In your presence I know I ought to have greater mastery over myself. But may the Lord God of heaven and of earth grant that you may never be struck by the blow which crushes me at this moment; for you are but a woman, and would not be able to endure so terrible an affliction. Forgive me! I am but a poor gentleman, while you belong to the race of the happy, of the all-powerful, of the elect —"

"M. de Bragelonne," replied Henrietta, "a heart such as yours merits all the consideration and respect which a queen's heart even can bestow. I am your friend, Monsieur; and as such, indeed, I would not allow your whole life to be poisoned by perfidy and covered with ridicule. It was I, indeed, who with more courage than any of your pretended friends, — I except M. de Guiche, — was the cause of your return from London; it is I, also, who have given you these melancholy proofs, — necessary however for your cure, if you are a lover with courage in his heart, and not a weeping Amadis. Do not thank me; pity me even, and do not serve the king less faithfully than you have done."

Raoul smiled bitterly. "Ah! true, true; I was forgetting that! The king is my master."

"Your liberty, nay, your very life, is at stake."

A steady, penetrating look informed Madame Henrietta that she was mistaken, and that her last argument was not likely to affect the young man. "Take care, M. de Bragelonne," she said; "for if you do not weigh well all your actions, you might throw into an extravagance of wrath a prince whose passions, once aroused, exceed the limits of reason, and you would thereby involve your friends and family in distress. You must bend; you must submit, and must cure yourself."

"I thank you, Madame, I appreciate the advice your

royal Highness is good enough to give me, and I will endeavor to follow it; but one final word, I beg."

"Name it."

"Should I be indiscreet in asking you the secret of this staircase, of this trap-door, — a secret which you have discovered?"

"Oh, nothing is more simple! For the purpose of exercising a surveillance over the young girls who are attached to my service, I have duplicate keys of their doors. It seemed very strange to me that M. de Saint-Aignan should change his apartments; it seemed very strange that the king should come to see M. de Saint-Aignan every day; and finally, it seemed very strange that so many things should be done during your absence, — that the very habits and customs of the court seemed to be changed. I do not wish to be trifled with by the king, nor to serve as a cloak for his love-affairs; for after La Vallière, who weeps, he will take a fancy to Montalais, who laughs, and then to Tonnay-Charente, who sings. To act such a part as that would be unworthy of me. I have thrust aside the scruples which my friendship for you suggested. I have discovered the secret. I have wounded your feelings, I know, and I again entreat you to excuse me; but I had a duty to fulfil. I have discharged it. You are now forewarned. The tempest will soon burst; protect yourself."

"You naturally expect, however, that a result of some kind must follow," replied Bragelonne, with firmness; "for you do not suppose I shall silently accept the shame which is thrust upon me, or the treachery which has been practised against me?"

"You will take whatever steps in the matter you please, M. Raoul; only, do not betray the source whence you derived the truth. That is all I have to ask; that is

the only price I require for the service I have rendered you."

"Fear nothing, Madame!" said Bragelonne, with a bitter smile.

"I bribed the locksmith in whom the lovers had confided. You can just as well do so as myself, can you not?"

"Yes, Madame. Your royal Highness, however, has no other advice or caution to give me, except that of not betraying you?"

"None other."

"I am, therefore, about to beg your royal Highness to allow me to remain here for one moment."

"Without me?"

"Oh, no, Madame! It matters very little, for what I have to do can be done in your presence. I only ask one moment to write a line to some one."

"It is dangerous, M. de Bragelonne. Take care!"

"No one can possibly know that your royal Highness has done me the honor to conduct me here. Besides, I shall sign the letter I am going to write."

"Do as you please, then."

Raoul drew out his tablet, and wrote rapidly on one of the leaves the following words: —

MONSIEUR THE COUNT, — Do not be surprised to find here this paper signed by me The friend whom I shall very shortly send to call on you will have the honor to explain the object of my visit to you.

VICOMTE RAOUL DE BRAGELONNE.

Rolling up the paper, and slipping it into the lock of the door which communicated with the room set apart for the two lovers, Raoul satisfied himself that the paper was so apparent that De Saint-Aignan could not but see it as he

entered; then he rejoined the princess, who had already reached the top of the staircase. They then separated, — Raoul pretending to thank her Highness; Henrietta pitying, or seeming to pity, with all her heart the unhappy man she had just condemned to so fearful torture. "Oh," she said, as she saw him disappear, pale as death, his eyes injected with blood, "if I had known this, I should have concealed the truth from that poor young man!"

CHAPTER LXI.

PORTHOS'S PLAN OF ACTION.

THE multiplicity of the personages we have introduced into this long history compels that each shall appear only in his own turn and according to the exigences of the recital. The result is that our readers have had no opportunity of again meeting our friend Porthos since his return from Fontainebleau. The honors which he had received from the king had not changed the tranquil, affectionate character of that worthy man; only, he held up his head a little higher than usual, and a majesty of demeanor as it were betrayed itself, since the honor of dining at the king's table had been accorded him.

His Majesty's banqueting-room had produced a certain effect upon Porthos. Le Seigneur de Bracieux et de Pierrefonds delighted to remember that during that memorable dinner the numerous array of servants and the large number of officials who were in attendance upon the guests gave a certain tone and effect to the repast, and seemed to furnish the room. Porthos proposed to confer upon Mouston a position of some kind or other, in order to establish a sort of hierarchy among his domestics, and to create a military household, — which was not unusual among the great captains of the age, since in the preceding century this luxury had been greatly encouraged by Messieurs de Tréville, de Schomberg, de la Vieuville, without alluding to Messieurs de Richelieu, de Condé, and de Bouillon-Turenne. And, therefore, why should not he, — Porthos, the

friend of the king and of M. Fouquet, a baron, an engineer, etc., — why should not he indeed enjoy all the delightful privileges attached to large possessions and great merit? Somewhat neglected by Aramis, who we know was greatly occupied with M. Fouquet; neglected also, on account of his being on duty, by D'Artagnan; tired of Trüchen and Planchet, — Porthos was surprised to find himself dreaming, without precisely knowing why; but if any one had said to him, "Do you want anything, Porthos?" he would most certainly have replied, "Yes."

After one of those dinners, during which Porthos attempted to recall to his mind all the details of the royal banquet, — half joyful, thanks to the excellence of the wines; half melancholy, thanks to his ambitious ideas, — Porthos was gradually falling off into a gentle doze, when his servant entered to announce that M. de Bragelonne wished to speak to him. Porthos passed into an adjoining room, where he found his young friend in the disposition of mind of which we are already aware. Raoul advanced towards Porthos, and shook him by the hand. Porthos, surprised at his seriousness of aspect, offered him a seat.

"Dear M. du Vallon," said Raoul, "I have a service to ask of you."

"Nothing could happen more fortunately, my young friend," replied Porthos. "I have had eight thousand livres sent me this morning from Pierrefonds; and if you want any money —"

"No, I thank you; it is not money."

"So much the worse, then. I have always heard it said that that is the rarest service, but the easiest to render. The remark struck me; I like to cite remarks that strike me."

"Your heart is as good as your mind is sound and true."

"You are too kind, I'm sure. Will you have your dinner immediately?"

"No; I am not hungry."

"Eh! What a dreadful country England is!"

"Not too much so; but —"

"Well, if such excellent fish and meat were not to be procured there, it would hardly be endurable."

"Yes. I have come —"

"I am listening. Only allow me to take something to drink. One gets thirsty in Paris;" and Porthos ordered a bottle of champagne to be brought. Then, having first filled Raoul's glass, he filled his own, took a large draught, and resumed: "I needed that, in order to listen to you with proper attention. I am now quite at your service. What have you to ask me, dear Raoul? What do you want?"

"Give me your opinion upon quarrels in general, my dear friend."

"My opinion? Well — but — Explain your idea a little," replied Porthos, rubbing his forehead.

"I mean, — are you generally of accommodating disposition whenever any misunderstanding arises between a friend of yours and a stranger, for instance?"

"Oh! of excellent disposition, as always."

"Very good; but what do you do in such a case?"

"Whenever any friend of mine has a quarrel, I always act upon one principle."

"What is that?"

"That all lost time is irreparable, and that one never arranges an affair so well as when the dispute is still warm."

"Ah! indeed, that is your principle?"

"Thoroughly; so, as soon as a quarrel takes place, I bring the two parties together."

"Exactly."

"You understand that by this means it is impossible for an affair not to be arranged."

"I should have thought," said Raoul, with astonishment, "that, treated in this manner, an affair would, on the contrary —"

"Oh, not the least in the world! Just fancy now! I have had in my life something like a hundred and eighty to a hundred and ninety regular duels, without reckoning hasty encounters or chance meetings."

"It is a very handsome number," said Raoul, unable to resist a smile.

"A mere nothing; but I am so gentle. D'Artagnan reckons his duels by hundreds. It is very true he is a little too hard and sharp, — I have often told him so."

"And so," resumed Raoul, "you generally arrange the affairs of honor your friends confide to you."

"There is not a single instance in which I have not finished by arranging every one of them," said Porthos, with a gentleness and confidence which surprised Raoul.

"But the way in which you settle them is at least honorable, I suppose?"

"Oh, rely upon that! And at this stage I will explain my other principle to you. As soon as my friend has confided his quarrel to me, this is what I do: I go to his adversary at once, armed with a politeness and self-possession which are absolutely requisite under such circumstances"

"That is the way, then," said Raoul, bitterly, "that you arrange the affairs so safely."

"I believe you. I go to the adversary, then, and say to him, 'It is impossible, Monsieur, that you are ignorant of the extent to which you have insulted my friend,'"

Raoul frowned at this remark.

"It sometimes happens, — very often indeed," pursued Porthos, — "that my friend has not been insulted at all; he has even been the first to give offence. You can imagine, therefore, whether my language is not well chosen;" and Porthos burst into a peal of laughter.

"Decidedly," said Raoul to himself, while the formidable thunder of Porthos's laughter was ringing in his ears, "I am very unfortunate. De Guiche treats me with coldness, D'Artagnan with ridicule, Porthos is too tame; no one is ready to 'arrange' this affair in my way. And I came to Porthos because I wished to find a sword instead of cold reasoning. Ah, what wretched luck!"

Porthos, who had recovered himself, continued: "By a simple expression, I leave my adversary without an excuse."

"That is as it may happen," said Raoul, indifferently.

"Not at all; it is quite certain. I have not left him an excuse; and then it is that I display all my courtesy, in order to attain the happy issue of my project. I advance, therefore, with an air of great politeness, and taking my adversary by the hand —"

"Oh!" said Raoul, impatiently.

"'Monsieur,' I say to him, 'now that you are convinced of having given the offence, we are sure of reparation; between my friend and yourself the future can offer only an exchange of gracious ceremonies. Consequently I am instructed to give you the length of my friend's sword —"

"What!" said Raoul.

"Wait a minute! — 'the length of my friend's sword. My horse is waiting below; my friend is in such and such a spot, and is impatiently awaiting your agreeable society. I will take you with me; we can call upon your second as we go along. The affair is arranged.'"

"And so," said Raoul, pale with vexation, "you reconcile the two adversaries on the ground."

"I beg your pardon," interrupted Porthos. "Reconcile? What for?"

"You said that the affair was arranged."

"Of course! since my friend is waiting for him."

"Well, what then? If he is waiting —"

"Well, if he is waiting, it is merely to stretch his legs a little; the adversary, on the contrary, is stiff from riding. They place themselves in proper order, and my friend kills his opponent; the affair is ended."

"Ah! he kills him?" cried Raoul.

"I should think so," said Porthos. "Is it likely I should ever have as a friend a man who allows himself to get killed? I have a hundred and one friends; at the head of the list stand your father, Aramis, and D'Artagnan, — all of whom are living and well, I believe."

"Oh, my dear baron!" exclaimed Raoul, delightedly, as he embraced Porthos.

"You approve of my method, then?" said the giant.

"I approve of it so thoroughly that I shall have recourse to it this very day, without a moment's delay, — at once, in fact. You are the very man I have been looking for"

"Good! Here I am, then. You want to fight?"

"Absolutely so."

"It is very natural. With whom?"

"With M. de Saint-Aignan."

"I know him, — a most agreeable man, who was exceedingly polite to me the day I had the honor of dining with the king. I shall certainly return his politeness, even if that were not my usual custom. So, he has given you offence?"

"A mortal offence."

"The devil! I can say 'mortal offence'?"

"More than that, even, if you like."

"That is very convenient."

"I may look upon it as all arranged, may I not?" said Raoul, smiling.

"As a matter of course. Where will you be waiting for him?"

"Ah! I forgot. It is a very delicate matter. M. de Saint-Aignan is a great friend of the king."

"So I have heard it said."

"So that if I kill him —"

"Oh, you will kill him certainly; you must take every precaution to do so! But there is no difficulty in these matters now; if you had lived in our early days, — oh, that was something like!"

"My dear friend, you have not quite understood me. I mean that M. de Saint-Aignan being a friend of the king, the affair will be more difficult to manage, since the king might learn beforehand —"

"Oh, no; that is not likely. You know my method: 'Monsieur, you have injured my friend, and —'"

"Yes, I know it."

"And then: 'Monsieur, I have horses below.' I carry him off before he can have spoken to any one."

"Will he allow himself, think you, to be carried off like that?"

"I should think so! I should like to see it fail! It would be the first time, if it did. It is true, though, that the young men of the present day — Bah! I would carry him off bodily, if it were necessary;" and Porthos, adding gesture to speech, lifted Raoul and his chair.

"Very good," said Raoul, laughing. "All we have to do is to state the grounds of the quarrel to M. de Saint-Aignan."

"Well; but that is done, it seems."

"No, my dear M. du Vallon, the usage of the present day requires that the cause of the quarrel should be explained."

"By your new method, yes. Well, then, tell me what it is — "

"The fact is — "

"Deuce take it! See how troublesome this is! In former days we never had any occasion to talk. People fought then for the sake of fighting; and I, for one, know no better reason than that."

"You are quite right, my friend."

"However, tell me what the cause is."

"It is too long a story to tell; only, as one must particularize to some extent — "

"Yes, yes, the devil! — with the new method."

"As it is necessary, I said, to be specific, and as on the other hand the affair is full of difficulties and requires the most absolute secrecy — "

"Oh! oh!"

"You will have the kindness merely to tell M. de Saint-Aignan that he has insulted me, — in the first place, by changing his lodgings."

"By changing his lodgings? Good!" said Porthos, who began to count on his fingers; "next?"

"Then, in getting a trap-door made in his new apartments."

"I understand," said Porthos; "a trap-door! Upon my word, this is very serious; you ought to be furious at that. What the deuce does the fellow mean by getting trap-doors made without first consulting you? Trap-doors! *Mordioux!* I have n't any, except in my dungeons at Bracieux."

"And you will add," said Raoul, "that my last motive

for considering myself insulted is the portrait that M. de Saint-Aignan well knows."

"Is it possible? A portrait too! A change of residence, a trap-door, and a portrait! Why, my dear friend, with but one of those causes of complaint there is enough, and more than enough, for all the gentlemen in France and Spain to cut one another's throats; and that is saying but very little."

"Well, my dear friend, you are furnished with all you need, I suppose?"

"I shall take a second horse with me. Select your own rendezvous; and while you are waiting there you can practise some of the best passes, so as to get your limbs as elastic as possible."

"Thank you. I shall be waiting for you in the wood of Vincennes, close to Minimes."

"All's right, then. Where am I to find this M. de Saint-Aignan?"

"At the Palais-Royal."

Porthos rang a huge hand-bell. "My court suit," he said to the servant who answered the summons, "my horse, and a led horse to accompany me." Then turning to Raoul as soon as the servant had quitted the room, he said, "Does your father know anything about this?"

"No; I am going to write to him."

"And D'Artagnan?"

"No, nor D'Artagnan, either. He is very cautious, you know, and might have diverted me from my purpose."

"D'Artagnan is a sound adviser, though," said Porthos, astonished that in his own loyal faith in D'Artagnan any one could have thought of himself so long as there was a D'Artagnan in the world.

"Dear M. du Vallon," replied Raoul, "do not question me any more, I implore you. I have told you all that I

had to say; it is prompt action that I now expect, as sharp and decided as you know how to arrange it. That, indeed, is my reason for having chosen you."

"You will be satisfied with me," replied Porthos.

"Do not forget, either, that except ourselves no one must know anything of this meeting."

"People always find these things out," said Porthos, "when a dead body is discovered in a wood. But I promise you everything, my dear friend, except concealing the dead body. There it is; and it must be seen, as a matter of course. It is a principle of mine not to bury bodies. That has a smack of the assassin about it. Every risk must take its risk, as they say in Normandy."

"To work, then, my dear friend!"

"Rely upon me," said the giant, finishing the bottle, while the servant spread out upon a sofa the gorgeously decorated dress trimmed with lace. Raoul left the room, saying to himself with a secret delight: "Perfidious king! traitorous monarch! I cannot reach thee. I do not wish it; for the person of a king is sacred. But your accomplice, your panderer, — the coward who represents you, — shall pay for your crime. I will kill him in thy name, and afterwards we will think of Louise."

CHAPTER LXII.

THE CHANGE OF RESIDENCE, THE TRAP-DOOR, AND THE PORTRAIT.

PORTHOS, to his great delight intrusted with this mission, which made him feel young again, took half an hour less than his usual time to put on his court suit. To show that he was a man acquainted with the usages of the highest society, he had begun by sending his lackey to inquire if M. de Saint-Aignan were at home, and received, in answer, that M. le Comte de Saint-Aignan had had the honor of accompanying the king to St. Germain, as well as the whole court, but that Monsieur the Count had just at that moment returned. Immediately upon this reply, Porthos made haste, and reached De Saint-Aignan's apartments just as the latter was having his boots taken off.

The expedition had been delightful. The king, who was in love more than ever and of course happier than ever had behaved in the most charming manner to every one Nothing could possibly equal his kindness. M. de Saint Aignan, it may be remembered, was a poet, and fancied that he had proved that he was so under too many memorable circumstances to allow the title to be disputed by any one. An indefatigable rhymester, he had during the whole of the journey overwhelmed with quatrains, sextains, and madrigals, first the king, and then La Vallière. The king was, on his side, in a similarly poetical mood, and had made a distich; while La Vallière, like all women who are in love, had composed two sonnets. As one may see, then, the day had not been a bad one for

Apollo; and therefore, as soon as he had returned to Paris, De Saint-Aignan, who knew beforehand that his verses would be extensively circulated in court circles, occupied himself, with a little more attention than he had been able to bestow during the excursion, with the composition as well as with the idea itself. Consequently, with all the tenderness of a father about to start his children in life, he candidly asked himself whether the public would find these fruits of his imagination sufficiently elegant and graceful; and in order to make his mind easy on the subject, M. de Saint-Aignan recited to himself the madrigal he had composed, and which he had repeated from memory to the king, and which he had promised to write out for him on his return, —

"'Iris, vos yeux malins ne disent pas toujours
Ce que votre pensée à votre cœur confie,
Iris, pourquoi faut-il que je passe ma vie
À plus aimer vos yeux qui m'ont joué ces tours?'"

This madrigal, graceful as it was, failed to satisfy De Saint-Aignan when it had passed from oral delivery to the written form of poetry. Many had thought it charming, — its author first of all; but on second view it was not so pleasing. So De Saint-Aignan, sitting at his table, with one leg crossed over the other, and rubbing his brow, repeated, —

"'Iris, vos yeux malins ne disent pas toujours —

Oh! as to that, now," he murmured, "that is irreproachable. I might even add that it is somewhat in the manner of Ronsard or Malherbe, which makes me proud. Unhappily, it is not so with the second line. There is good reason for the saying that the easiest line to make is the first." And he continued: —

"'Ce que votre pensée à votre cœur confie —

Ah, there is the 'thought' confiding in the 'heart'! Why should not the heart confide with as good reason in the thought? In faith, for my part, I see nothing to hinder. Where the devil have I been, to bring together these two hemistiches? Now, the third is good, —

'Iris, pourquoi faut-il que je passe ma vie —'

although the rhyme is not strong, — *vie* and *confie*. My faith! the Abbé Boyer, who is a great poet, has, like me, made a rhyme of *vie* and *confie* in the tragedy of 'Oropaste, or the False Tonaxare;' without reckoning that M. Corneille did not scruple to do so in his tragedy of 'Sophonisbe.' Good, then, for *vie* and *confie!* Yes; but the line is impertinent. I remember now that the king bit his nail at that moment. In fact, it gives him the appearance of saying to Mademoiselle de la Vallière, 'How does it happen that I am captivated by you?' It would have been better, I think, to say, —

'Que bénis soient les dieux qui condamnent ma vie —'

Condamnent! ah! well, yes, there is a compliment! — the king condemned to La Vallière — no!" Then he repeated: —

"'Mais bénis soient les dieux qui — destinent ma vie.'

Not bad, although *destinent ma vie* is weak; but, good heavens! everything can't be strong in a quatrain. *A plus aimer vos yeux,* — in loving more whom, what? Obscurity. But obscurity is nothing; since La Vallière and the king have understood me, every one will understand me. Yes; but here is something melancholy, — the last hemistich: *qui m'ont joué ces tours.* The plural necessitated by the rhyme! And then to call the modesty of La Vallière a trick, — that is not happy! I shall be a byword to all my quill-driving acquaintances. They will say that my poems

are verses in the grand-seigneur style; and if the king hears it said that I am a bad poet, he will take it into his head to believe it."

While confiding these words to his heart and engaging his heart in these thoughts, the count was undressing himself. He had just taken off his coat, and was putting on his dressing-gown, when he was informed that M. le Baron du Vallon de Bracieux de Pierrefonds was waiting to be received.

"Eh!" he said, "what does that bunch of names mean? I don't know him."

"It is the same gentleman," replied the lackey, "who had the honor of dining with you, Monseigneur, at the king's table, when his Majesty was staying at Fontainebleau."

"With the king, at Fontainebleau?" cried De Saint-Aignan. "Eh! quick, quick! introduce that gentleman."

The lackey hastened to obey. Porthos entered. M. de Saint-Aignan had an excellent recollection of persons, and at the first glance he recognized the gentleman from the country who enjoyed so singular a reputation, and whom the king had received so favorably at Fontainebleau, in spite of the smiles of some of those who were present. He therefore advanced towards Porthos with all outward signs of good-will, which Porthos thought but natural, considering that he himself, whenever he called upon an adversary, hoisted the standard of the most refined politeness. De Saint-Aignan desired the servant to give Porthos a chair; and the latter, who saw nothing unusual in this act of politeness, sat down gravely, and coughed.

The ordinary courtesies having been exchanged between the two gentlemen, the count, since to him the visit was paid, said, "May I ask, Monsieur the Baron, to what happy circumstance I owe the favor of your visit?"

"The very thing I am about to have the honor of explaining to you, Monsieur the Count; but, I beg your pardon —"

"What is the matter, Monsieur?" inquired De Saint-Aignan.

"I regret to say that I have broken your chair."

"Not at all, Monsieur," said De Saint-Aignan; "not at all."

"It is the fact, though, Monsieur the Count; I have broken it, — so much so, indeed, that if I remain in it I shall fall down, which would be an exceedingly disagreeable position for me in the discharge of the very serious mission which has been intrusted to me with regard to yourself."

Porthos rose; and but just in time, for the chair had given way several inches. De Saint-Aignan looked about him for something more solid for his guest to sit upon.

"Modern articles of furniture," said Porthos, while the count was looking about, "are constructed in a ridiculously light manner. In my early days, when I used to sit down with far more energy than now, I do not remember ever to have broken a chair, except in taverns, with my arms." De Saint-Aignan smiled at this remark. "But," said Porthos, as he settled himself on a couch, which creaked but did not give way beneath his weight, "that unfortunately has nothing whatever to do with my present visit."

"Why unfortunately? Are you the bearer of a message of ill omen, Monsieur the Baron?"

"Of ill omen, — for a gentleman? Certainly not, Monsieur the Count," replied Porthos, nobly. "I have simply come to say that you have seriously offended a friend of mine."

"I, Monsieur?" exclaimed De Saint-Aignan, — "I have

offended a friend of yours, do you say? May I ask his name?"

"M. Raoul de Bragelonne."

"I have offended M. Raoul de Bragelonne!" cried De Saint-Aignan. "I really assure you, Monsieur, that it is quite impossible; for M. de Bragelonne, whom I know but very slightly, — nay, whom I know hardly at all, — is in England; and as I have not seen him for a long time past, I cannot possibly have offended him."

"M. de Bragelonne is in Paris, Monsieur the Count," said Porthos, perfectly unmoved; "and I repeat, it is quite certain you have offended him, since he himself told me you had. Yes, Monsieur, you have seriously offended him, mortally offended him, I repeat."

"It is impossible, Monsieur the Baron, I swear, — quite impossible."

"Besides," added Porthos, "you cannot be ignorant of the circumstance, since M. de Bragelonne informed me that he had already apprised you of it by a note."

"I give you my word of honor, Monsieur, that I have received no note whatever."

"This is most extraordinary," replied Porthos.

"I will convince you," said De Saint-Aignan, "that I have received nothing in any way from him;" and he rang the bell. "Basque," he said to the servant who entered, "how many letters or notes were sent here during my absence?"

"Three, Monsieur the Count, — a note from M. de Fiesque, one from Madame de Laferté, and a letter from M. de las Fuentès."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, Monsieur the Count."

"Speak the truth before this gentleman, — the truth, you understand! I will take care you are not blamed."

"There was a note, also, from — from —"

"Well, from whom?"

"From Mademoiselle de la Val —"

"That is quite sufficient," interrupted Porthos. "I believe you, Monsieur the Count."

De Saint-Aignan dismissed the valet, and followed him to the door in order to close it after him; and when he had done so, looking straight before him, he happened to see in the keyhole of the adjoining apartment the paper which Bragelonne had slipped in there as he left. "What is this?" he said.

Porthos, who was sitting with his back to the room, turned round. "Oh! oh!" he said.

"A note in the keyhole!" exclaimed De Saint-Aignan.

"That is not unlikely to be the one we want, Monsieur the Count," said Porthos.

De Saint-Aignan took out the paper. "A note from M. de Bragelonne!" he exclaimed.

"You see, Monsieur, I was right. Oh, when I say a thing —"

"Brought here by M. de Bragelonne himself," the count murmured, turning pale. "This is infamous! How could he possibly have come here?" and the count rang again.

"Who has been here during my absence with the king?"

"No one, Monsieur."

"That is impossible. Some one must have been here."

"No one could possibly have entered, Monsieur; since I kept the keys in my own pocket."

"And yet I find this letter in that lock yonder. Some one must have put it there; it could not have come alone."

Basque opened his arms, as if signifying the most absolute ignorance on the subject.

"Probably it was M. de Bragelonne himself who placed it there," said Porthos.

"In that case he must have entered here."

"Without doubt, Monsieur."

"How could that have been, since I have the key in my own pocket?" returned Basque, perseveringly.

De Saint-Aignan crumpled up the letter in his hand, after having read it. "There is something mysterious about this," he murmured, absorbed in thought.

Porthos left him to his reflections; but after a while returned to the mission he had undertaken. "Shall we return to our little affair?" he said, addressing De Saint-Aignan, as soon as the lackey had disappeared.

"I think I can now understand it, from this note which has arrived here in so singular a manner. M. de Bragelonne says that a friend will call."

"I am his friend, and am the one he alludes to."

"For the purpose of giving me a challenge?"

"Precisely."

"And he complains that I have offended him?"

"Mortally so."

"In what way, may I ask?—for his conduct is so mysterious that it at least needs some explanation."

"Monsieur," replied Porthos, "my friend cannot but be right; and so far as his conduct is concerned, if it be mysterious, as you say, you have only yourself to blame for it."

Porthos pronounced these words with an amount of confidence which for a man who was unaccustomed to his ways must have indicated an infinity of sense.

"Mystery? Be it so; but what is the mystery about?" said De Saint-Aignan.

"You will think it best, perhaps," Porthos replied, with a low bow, "that I do not enter into particulars, and for excellent reasons."

"Oh, I perfectly understand you! We will touch very lightly upon it, then. So speak, Monsieur; I am listening."

"In the first place, Monsieur," said Porthos, "you have changed your apartments."

"Yes, that is quite true," said De Saint-Aignan.

"You admit it, then," said Porthos, with an air of satisfaction.

"Admit it! of course I admit it. Why should I not admit it, do you suppose?"

"You have admitted it. Very good," said Porthos, lifting up one finger.

"But how can my having moved my lodgings have done M. de Bragelonne any harm? Have the goodness to tell me that, for I positively do not comprehend a word of what you are saying."

Porthos stopped him, and then said with great gravity: "Monsieur, this is the first of M. de Bragelonne's complaints against you. If he makes a complaint, it is because he feels himself insulted."

De Saint-Aignan began to beat his foot impatiently on the floor. "This looks like a bad quarrel," he said.

"No one can possibly have a bad quarrel with the Vicomte de Bragelonne," returned Porthos; "but, at all events, you have nothing to add on the subject of your changing your apartments, I suppose?"

"Nothing. And what is the next point?"

"Ah, the next! You will observe, Monsieur, that the one I have already mentioned is a most serious injury, to which you have given no answer, or rather have answered very indifferently. So, Monsieur, you change your lodg-

ings; that offends M. de Bragelonne, and you do not attempt to excuse yourself? Very well!"

"What!" cried De Saint-Aignan, who was irritated by the coolness of his visitor, — "what! Am I to consult M. de Bragelonne whether I am to move or not? You can hardly be serious, Monsieur."

"Absolutely necessary, Monsieur; but, under any circumstances, you will admit that it is nothing in comparison with the second ground of complaint."

"Well, what is that?"

Porthos assumed a very serious expression as he said, "How about the trap-door, Monsieur?"

De Saint-Aignan turned exceedingly pale. He pushed back his chair so abruptly that Porthos, simple as he was, perceived that the blow had told. "The trap-door?" murmured De Saint-Aignan.

"Yes, Monsieur, explain that if you can," said Porthos, shaking his head.

De Saint-Aignan held down his head. "Oh, I have been betrayed," he murmured; "everything is known!"

"Everything," replied Porthos, who knew nothing.

"You see me overwhelmed," pursued De Saint-Aignan, — "overwhelmed to such a degree that I hardly know what I am about."

"A guilty conscience, Monsieur! Your affair is a bad one."

"Monsieur!"

"And when the public shall learn all about it, and will judge —"

"Oh, Monsieur!" exclaimed the count, hurriedly, "such a secret ought not to be known, even by one's confessor!"

"That we will think about," said Porthos; "the secret will not go far, in fact."

"But, Monsieur," returned De Saint-Aignan, "is M. de Bragelonne, in penetrating the secret, aware of the danger to which he exposes himself and others?"

"M. de Bragelonne incurs no danger, Monsieur, nor does he fear any either, — as you, if it please Heaven, will find out very soon."

"This fellow is a perfect madman," thought De Saint-Aignan. "What, in Heaven's name, does he want?" He then said aloud: "Come, Monsieur, let us hush up this affair."

"You forget the portrait!" said Porthos, in a voice of thunder, which made the count's blood freeze in his veins.

As the portrait in question was La Vallière's portrait, and as no mistake could any longer exist on the subject, De Saint-Aignan's eyes were completely opened. "Ah," he exclaimed, — "ah, Monsieur, I remember now that M. de Bragelonne was engaged to be married to her."

Porthos assumed an imposing air — all the majesty of ignorance, in fact — as he said: "It matters nothing whatever to me, nor to yourself indeed, whether or not my friend was, as you say, engaged to be married. I am even astonished that you should have made use of so indiscreet a remark. It may possibly do your cause harm, Monsieur."

"Monsieur," replied De Saint-Aignan, "you are the incarnation of intelligence, delicacy, and loyalty of feeling united. I see the whole matter now clearly enough."

"So much the better," said Porthos.

"And," pursued De Saint-Aignan, "you have made me comprehend it in the most ingenious and the most delicate manner possible. Thank you, Monsieur, thank you." Porthos drew himself up. "Only, now that I know everything, permit me to explain —"

Porthos shook his head as a man who does not wish to hear; but De Saint-Aignan continued: "I am in despair, I assure you, at all that has happened; but how would you have acted in my place? Come, between ourselves, tell me what would you have done?"

Porthos raised his head. "There is no question at all of what I should have done, young man; you have now," he said, "been made acquainted with the three causes of complaint against you, I believe?"

"As for the first, my change of rooms, — and I now address myself to you, as a man of honor and of great intelligence, — could I, when the desire of so august a personage was so urgently expressed that I should move, ought I to have disobeyed?"

Porthos was about to speak, but De Saint-Aignan did not give him time to answer. "Ah! my frankness, I see, convinces you," he said, interpreting the movement in his own interest. "You perceive that I am right?"

Porthos did not reply. De Saint-Aignan continued: "I pass to that unfortunate trap-door," placing his hand on Porthos's arm, — "that trap-door, the occasion and the means of so much unhappiness, and which was constructed for — you know what. Well, then, in plain truth, do you suppose that it was I who, of my own accord, in such a place too, had that trap-door made? Oh, no! you do not believe it; and here, again, you feel, you guess, you understand the influence of a will superior to my own. You can conceive the infatuation, — I do not speak of love, that madness irresistible! But, thank Heaven! happily the affair is with a man who has so much sensitiveness of feeling. If it were not so, indeed, what an amount of misery and scandal would fall upon her, poor girl! and upon him — whom I will not name."

Porthos, confused and bewildered by the eloquence and gestures of De Saint-Aignan, made a thousand efforts to stem this torrent of words, of which, by the by, he did not understand a single one; he remained upright and motionless on his seat, and that was all he could do.

De Saint-Aignan continued, and gave a new inflection to his voice, and an increasing vehemence to his gesture: "As for the portrait, — for I readily believe the portrait is the principal cause of complaint, — tell me candidly if you think me to blame? Who was it that wished to have her portrait? Was it I? Who is in love with her? Is it I? Who desires her? who has won her? Is it I? No, a thousand times no! I know M. de Bragelonne must be in a state of despair; I know these misfortunes are most cruel. But I, too, am suffering as well; and yet there is no possibility of offering any resistance. If he struggles, he will be derided; if he resists, he is lost. You will tell me, I know, that despair is madness; but you are reasonable, — you have understood me. I perceive by your serious, thoughtful, embarrassed air, even, that the importance of the situation in which we are placed has not escaped you. Return, therefore, to M. de Bragelonne; thank him — as I have indeed reason to thank him — for having chosen as an intermediary a man of your merit. Believe me that I shall, on my side, preserve an eternal gratitude for the man who has so ingeniously, so cleverly corrected the misunderstanding between us. And since ill-luck would have it that the secret should be known to four instead of to three, why, this secret, which might make the most ambitious man's fortune, I am delighted to share with you, Monsieur; from the bottom of my heart I am delighted at it. From this very moment you can make use of me as you please; I place myself entirely at your mercy. What can I possibly do for you?

What can I solicit, nay, require even? Speak, Monsieur, speak!"

According to the familiarly friendly fashion of that period, De Saint-Aignan threw his arms round Porthos, and clasped him tenderly in his embrace. Porthos allowed him to do this with the most complete indifference.

"Speak!" resumed De Saint-Aignan; "what do you require?"

"Monsieur," said Porthos, "I have a horse below; be good enough to mount him. He is a very good one, and will play you no tricks."

"Mount on horseback! What for?" inquired De Saint-Aignan, with no little curiosity.

"To accompany me where M. de Bragelonne is awaiting us."

"Ah! he wishes to speak to me, I suppose? I can well believe that; he wishes to have the details, very likely. Alas! it is a very delicate matter; but at the present moment I cannot, for the king is waiting for me."

"The king will wait," said Porthos.

"But where is M. de Bragelonne expecting me?"

"At the Minimes, at Vincennes."

"Ah, indeed! but are we going to laugh over the affair when we get there?"

"I don't think it likely, — not I, at least;" and the face of Porthos assumed a stern hardness of expression. "The Minimes is a rendezvous for duels."

"Very well; what, then, have I to do at the Minimes?"

Porthos slowly drew his sword, and said, "That is the length of my friend's sword."

"Why, the man is mad!" cried De Saint-Aignan.

The color mounted to Porthos's face, as he replied: "If I had not the honor of being in your own apartment, Monsieur, and of representing M. de Bragelonne's interests, I

would throw you out of the window. It will be merely a pleasure postponed, and you will lose nothing by waiting. Will you come to the Minimes, Monsieur?"

"Eh!"

"Will you go thither of your own free will?"

"But —"

"I will carry you if you do not come. Take care!"

"Basque!" cried M. de Saint-Aignan. As soon as Basque appeared, he said, "The king wishes to see Monsieur the Count."

"That is very different," said Porthos; "the king's service before everything else. We will wait there until this evening, Monsieur." And saluting De Saint-Aignan with his usual courtesy, Porthos left the room, delighted at having arranged another affair.

De Saint-Aignan looked after him as he left; and then hastily putting on his coat again, he ran off, arranging his dress as he went along, muttering to himself: "The Minimes! the Minimes! We will see how the king will like this challenge; for it is for him, after all, *pardieu!*"

CHAPTER LXIII.

RIVAL POLITICS.

On his return from the ride which had been so prolific in poetical effusions, and in which every one had paid tribute to the Muses, as the poets of the period used to say, the king found M. Fouquet waiting for an audience. Behind the king came M. Colbert, who had met the king in the corridor, as if on the watch for him, and followed him like a jealous and watchful shadow, — M. Colbert, with his square head, and his vulgar and untidy though rich costume, which gave him some resemblance to a Flemish gentleman after drinking beer. Fouquet, at the sight of his enemy, remained unmoved, and during the whole of the scene which followed observed that line of conduct so difficult to a man of refinement whose heart is filled with contempt, but who wishes to suppress every indication of it, lest he may do his adversary too much honor. Colbert did not conceal his insolent joy. In his opinion, M. Fouquet's was a game very badly played and hopelessly lost, although not yet finished. Colbert belonged to that school of politicians who think cleverness alone worthy of their admiration, and success the only thing worth caring for. Colbert, moreover, who was not simply an envious and jealous man, but who had the king's interest really at heart, because he was thoroughly imbued with the highest sense of probity in all matters of figures and accounts, could well afford to assign as a pretext for his conduct, that in hating and doing his utmost to ruin M. Fouquet

he had nothing in view but the welfare of the State and the dignity of the crown.

None of these details escaped Fouquet's observation. Through his enemy's thick, bushy brows, and despite the restless movement of his eyelids, he could, by merely looking at his eyes, penetrate to the very bottom of Colbert's heart; he saw, then, all there was in that heart, — hatred and triumph. But as he wished, while observing everything, to remain himself impenetrable, he composed his features, smiled with that charmingly sympathetic smile which was peculiarly his own, and saluted the king with the most dignified and graceful ease and elasticity of manner. "Sire," he said, "I perceive by your Majesty's joyous air that you have had a pleasant ride."

"Charming, indeed, Monsieur the Superintendent, charming! You were very wrong not to come with us as I invited you to do."

"I was working, Sire," replied the superintendent, who did not take the trouble to turn aside his head even in recognition of Colbert's presence.

"Ah! M. Fouquet," cried the king, "there is nothing like the country. I should be delighted to live in the country always, in the open air and under the trees."

"Oh! your Majesty is not yet weary of the throne, I trust?" said Fouquet.

"No; but thrones of soft turf are very delightful."

"Your Majesty gratifies my utmost wishes in speaking in that manner, for I have a request to submit to you."

"On whose behalf, Monsieur?"

"On behalf of the nymphs of Vaux, Sire."

"Ah! ah!" said Louis XIV.

"Your Majesty once deigned to make me a promise," said Fouquet.

"Yes, I remember it."

"The *fête* at Vaux, the celebrated *fête*, is it not, Sire?" said Colbert, endeavoring to show his importance by taking part in the conversation.

Fouquet, with the profoundest contempt, did not take the slightest notice of the remark, as if, so far as he was concerned, Colbert had not spoken. "Your Majesty is aware," he said, "that I destine my estate at Vaux to receive the most amiable of princes, the most powerful of monarchs."

"I have given you my promise, Monsieur," said Louis XIV., smiling; "and a king never departs from his word."

"And I have come now, Sire, to inform your Majesty that I am ready to obey your orders in every respect."

"Do you promise me many wonders, Monsieur the Superintendent?" said Louis, looking at Colbert.

"Wonders? Oh, no, Sire! I do not undertake that; but I hope to be able to procure your Majesty a little pleasure, perhaps even a little forgetfulness of the cares of State."

"Nay, nay, M. Fouquet," returned the king; "I insist upon the word 'wonders.' Oh, you are a magician! We know your power; we know that you could find gold, even were there none in the world. And, in fact, people say you make it."

Fouquet felt that the shot was discharged from a double quiver, and that the king had launched an arrow from his own bow as well as one from Colbert's. "Oh!" said he, laughingly, "the people know perfectly well out of what mine I procure the gold; they know it only too well, perhaps. Besides," he added proudly, "I can assure your Majesty that the gold destined to pay the expenses of the *fête* at Vaux will cost neither blood nor tears; hard labor it may, perhaps, but that can be paid for."

Louis remained silent; he wished to look at Colbert. Colbert, too, wished to reply; but a glance as swift as an eagle's, — a proud, loyal, king-like glance, indeed, — which Fouquet darted at the latter, arrested the words upon his lips. The king, who had by this time recovered his self-possession, turned towards Fouquet, saying, "I presume, therefore, I am now to consider myself formally invited?"

"Yes, Sire, if it pleases your Majesty."

"For what day?"

"Any day your Majesty may find most convenient."

"You speak like an enchanter who improvises, M. Fouquet. I could not say so much, indeed."

"Your Majesty will do, whenever you please, everything that a monarch can and ought to do. The King of France has servants at his bidding who are able to do anything on his behalf, to accomplish everything to gratify his pleasures."

Colbert tried to look at the superintendent in order to see whether this remark was an approach to less hostile sentiments on his part. But Fouquet had not even looked at his enemy; so far as he was concerned, Colbert did not exist.

"Very good, then," said the king; "will a week hence suit you?"

"Perfectly well, Sire."

"This is Tuesday; if I give you until next Sunday week, will that be sufficient?"

"The delay which your Majesty deigns to accord me will greatly aid the various works which my architects have in hand for the purpose of adding to the amusement of your Majesty and your friends."

"By the by, speaking of my friends," resumed the king; "how do you intend to treat them?"

"The king is master everywhere, Sire; your Majesty

will draw up your own list and give your own orders. All those you may deign to invite will be my guests, — my honored guests indeed."

"I thank you!" returned the king, touched by the noble thought expressed in so noble a tone.

Fouquet therefore took leave of Louis XIV., after a few words had been added with regard to the details of certain matters of business. He felt that Colbert would remain behind with the king, that they would both converse about him, and that neither of them would spare him in the least degree. The satisfaction of being able to give a last and terrible blow to his enemy seemed to him almost like a compensation for everything to which they were about to subject him. He turned back again immediately, when he had already reached the door, and addressing the king, "Pardon, Sire," said he, — "pardon!"

"Pardon for what?" said the king, graciously.

"For a serious fault which I committed unawares."

"A fault! You! Ah, M. Fouquet, I shall be unable to do otherwise than forgive you. In what way or against whom have you been found wanting?"

"Against all propriety, Sire. I forgot to inform your Majesty of a circumstance of considerable importance."

"What is it?"

Colbert trembled; he expected a denunciation. His conduct had been unmasked. A single syllable from Fouquet, a single proof formally advanced, and before the youthful loyalty of Louis XIV. Colbert's favor would disappear at once. The latter trembled, therefore, lest so daring a blow might not overthrow his whole scaffold. In point of fact, the opportunity was so admirably suited to be taken advantage of, that a skilful player like Aramis would not have let it slip. "Sire," said Fouquet, with an easy air, "since you have had the kindness to forgive

me, I am indifferent about my confession: this morning I sold one of the official appointments I hold."

"One of your appointments?" said the king; "which?"

Colbert turned livid. "That which conferred upon me, Sire, a grand gown and an air of gravity, — the appointment of procureur-général."

The king involuntarily uttered a loud exclamation and looked at Colbert, who with his face bedewed with perspiration felt almost on the point of fainting. "To whom have you sold this appointment, M. Fouquet?" inquired the king.

Colbert was obliged to lean against the side of the fireplace.

"To a councillor belonging to the parliament, Sire, whose name is Vanel."

"Vanel?"

"A friend of the intendant Colbert," added Fouquet, letting every word fall from his lips with inimitable nonchalance, and with an admirably assumed expression of forgetfulness and ignorance which neither painter, actor, nor poet could reproduce with brush, gesture, or pen. Then having finished, having overwhelmed Colbert beneath the weight of this superiority, the superintendent again saluted the king and quitted the room, partially revenged by the stupefaction of the king and the humiliation of the favorite.

"Is it really possible," said the king, as soon as Fouquet had disappeared, "that he has sold that office?"

"Yes, Sire," said Colbert, meaningly.

"He must be mad," the king added.

Colbert this time did not reply; he had penetrated the king's thought. That thought promised him revenge. His hatred was augmented by jealousy; and a threat of disgrace was now added to the plan he had arranged for

his ruin. Colbert felt assured that for the future, as between Louis XIV. and himself, his hostile ideas would meet with no obstacles, and that at the first fault committed by Fouquet which could be laid hold of as a pretext, the chastisement impending over him would be precipitated. Fouquet had thrown aside his weapons of defence; Hate and Jealousy had picked them up.

Colbert was invited by the king to the *fête* at Vaux; he bowed like a man confident in himself, and accepted the invitation with the air of one who confers a favor. The king was about writing down De Saint-Aignan's name on his list of invitations, when the usher announced the Comte de Saint-Aignan. As soon as the royal "Mercury" entered, Colbert discreetly withdrew.

CHAPTER LXIV.

RIVAL LOVERS.

De Saint-Aignan had quitted Louis XIV. hardly two hours before; but in the first effervescence of his affection, whenever Louis XIV. did not see La Vallière he was obliged to talk of her. Now, the only person with whom he could speak about her at his ease was De Saint-Aignan, and that person had therefore become indispensable to him.

"Ah! is that you, Count?" the king exclaimed, as soon as he perceived him, — doubly delighted, not only to see him again, but also to get rid of Colbert, whose scowling face always put him out of humor, — "so much the better. I am very glad to see you; you will make one of the travelling-party, I suppose?"

"Of what travelling-party are you speaking, Sire?" inquired De Saint-Aignan.

"The one we are making up to go to the *fête* the superintendent is about to give at Vaux. Ah! De Saint-Aignan, you will at last see a *fête*, a royal *fête*, by the side of which all our amusements at Fontainebleau are petty, contemptible affairs."

"At Vaux? — the superintendent going to give a *fête* in your Majesty's honor? Nothing more than that!"

"'Nothing more than that!' do you say? It is very diverting to find you treating it with so much disdain. Are you, who express such indifference on the subject, aware that as soon as it is known that M. Fouquet is

going to receive me at Vaux next Sunday week, people will be striving their very utmost to get invited to the *fête?* I repeat, De Saint-Aignan, you shall be one of the invited guests."

"Very well, Sire; unless I shall in the mean time have undertaken a longer and less agreeable journey."

"What journey?"

"The one across the Styx, Sire."

"Bah!" said Louis XIV., laughing.

"No, seriously, Sire," replied De Saint-Aignan, "I am invited there; and in such a way, in truth, that I hardly know what to say or how to act in order to refuse it."

"I do not understand you. I know that you are in a poetical vein; but try not to sink from Apollo to Phœbus."

"Very well; if your Majesty will deign to listen to me, I will not keep you in suspense any longer."

"Speak!"

"Your Majesty knows the Baron du Vallon?"

"Yes, indeed, — a good servant to my father, the late king, and an admirable companion at table; for I think you are referring to him who dined with us at Fontainebleau?"

"Precisely; but you have omitted to add to his other qualifications, Sire, that he is a most charming killer of people."

"What! does M. du Vallon wish to kill you?"

"Or to get me killed, — which is the same thing."

"Bless my heart!"

"Do not laugh, Sire, for I am not saying a word that is not the exact truth."

"And you say he wishes to get you killed?"

"That is that excellent person's present idea."

"Be easy; I will defend you, if he be in the wrong."

"Ah! there is an 'if.'"

"Of course! Answer me as candidly as if it were some one else's affair instead of your own, my poor De Saint-Aignan: is he right or wrong?"

"Your Majesty shall be the judge."

"What have you done to him?"

"To him, personally, nothing at all; but it seems I have to one of his friends."

"It is all the same. Is his friend one of the celebrated 'four'?"

"No! It is only the son of one of the celebrated 'four.'"

"What have you done to the son? Come, tell me."

"Why, I have helped some one to take his mistress from him."

"You confess it, then?"

"I cannot help confessing it, for it is true."

"In that case you are wrong."

"Ah! I am wrong?"

"Yes; and, my faith, if he kills you —"

"Well?"

"Well, he will do what is right."

"Ah! that is your Majesty's way of reasoning, then?"

"Do you think it a bad way?"

"It is a very expeditious way, at all events."

"'Good justice is prompt;' so my grandfather Henry IV. used to say."

"In that case your Majesty will immediately sign my adversary's pardon, for he is now waiting for me at the Minimes to kill me."

"His name, and a parchment!"

"There is a parchment upon your Majesty's table; and as for his name —"

"Well, what is it?"

"The Vicomte de Bragelonne, Sire."

"The Vicomte de Bragelonne!" exclaimed the king, changing from a fit of laughter to the most profound stupor; and then after a moment's silence, while he wiped his forehead, which was bedewed with perspiration, he again murmured, "Bragelonne!"

"No other than he, Sire."

"Bragelonne, who was affianced to —"

"Yes, Sire."

"He was in London, however."

"Yes; but I can assure you, Sire, he is there no longer."

"Is he in Paris?"

"He is at the Minimes, Sire, where he is waiting for me, as I have already had the honor of telling you."

"Does he know all?"

"Yes; and many things besides. Perhaps your Majesty would like to look at the letter I have received from him;" and De Saint-Aignan drew from his pocket the note with which we are already acquainted. "When your Majesty has read the letter, I will tell you how it reached me."

The king read it in great agitation, and immediately said, "Well?"

"Well, Sire; your Majesty knows a certain carved lock, closing a certain door of ebony-wood, which separates a certain apartment from a certain blue and white sanctuary?"

"Of course! Louise's boudoir."

"Yes, Sire. Well, it was in the key-hole of that lock that I found that note. Who placed it there? Either M. de Bragelonne, or the devil himself; but inasmuch as the note smells of amber and not of sulphur, I conclude that it must be, not the devil, but M. de Bragelonne."

Louis bent down his head, and seemed absorbed in sad and melancholy reflections. Perhaps something like remorse was at that moment passing through his heart. "Oh!" he said, "that secret discovered!"

"Sire, I shall do my utmost that the secret dies in the breast of the man who possesses it," said De Saint-Aignan, in a tone of bravado, as he moved towards the door; but a gesture of the king made him pause.

"Where are you going?" he inquired.

"Where I am waited for, Sire."

"What for?"

"To fight, in all probability."

"You fight!" exclaimed the king. "One moment, if you please, Monsieur the Count!"

De Saint-Aignan shook his head, as a rebellious child does whenever any one interferes to prevent him from throwing himself into a well or playing with a knife. "But yet, Sire —" he said.

"In the first place," continued the king, "I require to be enlightened a little."

"Upon that point, if your Majesty will be pleased to interrogate me," replied De Saint-Aignan, "I will throw what light I can."

"Who told you that M. de Bragelonne had penetrated into that room?"

"The letter which I found in the key-hole told me so."

"Who told you that it was De Bragelonne who put it there?"

"Who but himself would have dared to undertake such a mission?"

"You are right. How was he able to get into your rooms?"

"Ah! that is very serious, inasmuch as all the doors

were closed, and my lackey, Basque, had the keys in his pocket."

"Your lackey must have been bribed."

"Impossible, Sire; for if he had been bribed, those who did so would not have sacrificed the poor fellow, whom it is not unlikely they might want to turn to further use by and by, in showing so clearly that it was he of whom they had made use."

"Quite true. And now there remains but one conjecture."

"Let us see, Sire, if it is the same that has presented itself to my mind."

"That he effected an entrance by means of the staircase."

"Alas! Sire, that seems to me more than probable."

"There is no doubt that some one sold the secret of the trap-door."

"Either sold it or gave it."

"Why do you make that distinction?"

"Because there are certain persons, Sire, who being above the price of a treason give, and do not sell."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, Sire, your Majesty's mind is too clear-sighted not to guess what I mean, and you will save me the embarrassment of naming any one."

"You are right: you mean Madame!"

"Ah!" said De Saint-Aignan.

"Madame, whose suspicions were aroused by your changing your lodgings."

"Madame, who has keys of the apartments of her maids of honor, and is powerful enough to discover what no one but yourself or she would be able to discover."

"And you suppose, then, that my sister has entered into an alliance with Bragelonne?"

"Eh! eh! Sire—"

"So far as to inform him of all the details of the affair?"

"Perhaps even further still."

"Further? What do you mean?"

"Perhaps to the point of going with him."

"Which way, — through your own apartments?"

"You think it impossible, Sire? Well, listen to me! Your Majesty knows that Madame is very fond of perfumes?"

"Yes, she acquired that taste from my mother."

"Vervain particularly."

"Yes, it is the scent she prefers to all others."

"Very good, Sire! my apartments smell very strongly of vervain."

The king remained silent and thoughtful for a few moments, and then resumed: "But why should Madame take Bragelonne's part against me?" De Saint-Aignan could very easily have replied: "A woman's jealousy!" In his question the king had probed his friend to the bottom of his heart to ascertain if he had learned the secret of his flirtation with his sister-in-law. But De Saint-Aignan was not an ordinary courtier; he did not lightly run the risk of finding out family secrets; and he was too good a friend of the Muses not to think very frequently of poor Ovidius Naso, whose eyes shed so many tears in expiation of his crime for having once beheld something, one hardly knows what, in the palace of Augustus. He therefore passed by Madame's secret very skilfully. But since he had exhibited his sagacity in proving Madame's presence in his rooms with Bragelonne, it was now necessary for him to pay interest on that self-conceit, and reply clearly to the question, "Why has Madame taken Bragelonne's part against me?"

"Why?" replied De Saint-Aignan. "Your Majesty

forgets, I presume, that the Comte de Guiche is the intimate friend of the Vicomte de Bragelonne?"

"I do not see the connection, however," said the king.

"Ah! I beg your pardon then, Sire; but I thought the Comte de Guiche was a very great friend of Madame."

"Quite true," the king returned. "There is no occasion to search any further; the blow came from that direction."

"And is not your Majesty of the opinion that in order to ward it off it will be necessary to deal another blow?"

"Yes; but not one of the kind given in the Bois de Vincennes," replied the king.

"You forget, Sire," said De Saint-Aignan, "that I am a gentleman, and that I have been challenged."

"The challenge neither concerns nor was it intended for you."

"But it is I who have been expected at the Minimes, Sire, during the last hour and more; and I shall be dishonored if I do not go there."

"The first honor and duty of a gentleman is obedience to his sovereign."

"Sire!"

"I order you to remain."

"Sire!"

"Obey, Monsieur!"

"As your Majesty pleases."

"Besides, I wish to have the whole of this affair explained; I wish to know how it is that I have been so insolently trifled with as to have the sanctuary of my affection pried into. It is not you, De Saint-Aignan, who ought to punish those who have acted in this manner; for it is not your honor they have attacked, but my own."

"I implore your Majesty not to overwhelm M. de Bragelonne with your wrath; for although in the whole of this

affair he may have shown himself deficient in prudence, he has not been so in his feelings of loyalty."

"Enough! I shall know how to decide between the just and the unjust, even in the height of my anger. But take care that not a word of this is breathed to Madame!"

"But what am I to do with regard to M. de Bragelonne? He will be seeking me in every direction, and —"

"I shall either have spoken to him, or taken care that he has been spoken to before the evening is over."

"Let me once more entreat your Majesty to be indulgent towards him."

"I have been indulgent long enough, Count," said Louis XIV., frowning; "it is time to show certain persons that I am master in my own palace."

The king had hardly pronounced these words, which betokened that a fresh feeling of dissatisfaction was mingled with the remembrance of an old one, when the usher appeared at the door of the cabinet. "What is the matter," inquired the king, "and why do you presume to come when I have not summoned you?"

"Sire," said the usher, "your Majesty desired me to permit M. le Comte de la Fère to pass freely at any time when he might wish to speak to your Majesty."

"Well?"

"M. le Comte de la Fère is now waiting to see your Majesty."

The king and De Saint-Aignan at this reply exchanged a look which betrayed more uneasiness than surprise. Louis hesitated for a moment, but almost immediately forming a resolution, he said: "Go, De Saint-Aignan, and find Louise; inform her of the plot against us. Do not let her be ignorant that Madame is beginning again her persecutions, and that she has set to work those who would have done better had they remained neutral."

"Sire —"

"If Louise gets nervous and frightened, reassure her; tell her that the king's love is an impenetrable shield over her. If, as I suspect is the case, she already knows everything, or if she has already been herself subjected to an attack, tell her, be sure to tell her, De Saint-Aignan," added the king, trembling with passion, — "tell her, I say, that this time, instead of defending her, I will avenge her, and that too so terribly that no one will in future even dare to raise his eyes towards her."

"Is that all, Sire?"

"Yes; all. Go quickly, and remain faithful, — you who live in the midst of this hell without having, like myself, the hope of paradise."

De Saint-Aignan almost exhausted himself in protestations of devotion, took the king's hand, kissed it, and left the room radiant with delight.

CHAPTER LXV.

KING AND NOBILITY.

THE king endeavored to recover his self-possession as quickly as possible, in order to meet M. de la Fère with an undisturbed countenance. He clearly saw that it was not mere chance which had induced the count's visit. He had a vague impression of the serious import of that visit; but he felt that to a man of Athos's tone of mind, to a person so distinguished, nothing disagreeable or disordered should be presented. As soon as the king had satisfied himself that so far as appearances were concerned he was perfectly calm again, he gave directions to the ushers to introduce the count.

A few minutes afterwards Athos, in full court dress and with his breast covered with the orders that he alone had the right to wear at the Court of France, presented himself with so grave and solemn an air that the king perceived at the first glance that he had not been mistaken in his anticipations. Louis advanced a step towards the count, and with a smile held out his hand to him, over which Athos bowed with the air of the deepest respect.

"M. le Comte de la Fère," said the king, rapidly, "you are so seldom here that it is a very great happiness to see you."

Athos bowed and replied, "I should wish always to enjoy the happiness of being near your Majesty."

That reply, made in that tone, evidently signified, "I should wish to be one of your Majesty's advisers, to save

you from the commission of faults." The king so understood it, and determined in this man's presence to preserve all the advantages which could be derived from his command over himself as well as from his rank and position.

"I see you have something to say to me," he said.

"Had it not been so, I should not have presumed to present myself before your Majesty."

"Speak quickly; I am anxious to satisfy you," returned the king, seating himself.

"I am persuaded," replied Athos, in a slightly agitated tone of voice, "that your Majesty will give me every satisfaction."

"Ah!" said the king, with a certain haughtiness of manner, "you have come to lodge a complaint here, then?"

"It would be a complaint," returned Athos, "only in the event of your Majesty — But if you will deign to permit me, Sire, I will begin the conversation at the beginning."

"I am listening."

"Your Majesty will remember that at the period of the Duke of Buckingham's departure I had the honor of an interview with you."

"At or about that period I think I remember you did; only, with regard to the subject of the conversation, I have quite forgotten it."

Athos started, as he replied: "I shall have the honor to recall it to your Majesty. It was with regard to a demand which I addressed to you respecting a marriage which M. de Bragelonne wished to contract with Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"Ah!" thought the king, "we have come to it now. I remember," he said, aloud.

"At that period," pursued Athos, "your Majesty was so kind and generous towards M. de Bragelonne and my-

self that not a single word which then fell from your lips has escaped my memory; and when I asked your Majesty to accord me Mademoiselle de la Vallière's hand for M. de Bragelonne, you refused."

"Quite true," said Louis, dryly.

"Alleging," Athos hastened to say, "that the young lady had no position in society."

Louis could hardly force himself to listen patiently.

"That," added Athos, "she had but little fortune."

The king threw himself back in his arm chair.

"That her extraction was indifferent."

A renewed impatience on the part of the king.

"And little beauty," added Athos, pitilessly.

This last bolt buried itself deep in the king's heart, and made him almost bound from his seat.

"You have a good memory, Monsieur," he said.

"I invariably have, on all occasions when I have had the distinguished honor of an interview with your Majesty," retorted the count, without being in the least disconcerted.

"Very good; it is admitted I said all that."

"And I thanked your Majesty, because those words testified an interest in M. de Bragelonne, which did him much honor."

"And you may possibly remember," said the king, very deliberately, "that you had the greatest repugnance to this marriage?"

"Quite true, Sire."

"And that you solicited my permission against your own inclination?"

"Yes, Sire."

"And, finally, I remember also, — for I have a memory nearly as good as your own, — I remember, I say, that you observed at the time: 'I do not believe that Mademoiselle de la Vallière loves M. de Bragelonne.' Is that true?"

The blow told well, but Athos did not shrink. "Sire," he said, "I have already begged your Majesty's forgiveness; but there are certain particulars in that conversation which will be intelligible in the *dénouement*."

"Well, what is the *dénouement*, Monsieur?"

"This: your Majesty then said that you would defer the marriage out of regard for M. de Bragelonne's own interests."

The king remained silent.

"M. de Bragelonne is now so exceedingly unhappy that he cannot any longer defer asking your Majesty for a solution of the matter."

The king turned pale; Athos looked at him with fixed attention.

"And what," said the king, with considerable hesitation, "does M. de Bragelonne request?"

"Precisely the very thing that I came to ask your Majesty for at my last audience; namely, your Majesty's consent to his marriage."

The king remained silent.

"The obstacles in the way are all now quite removed for us," continued Athos. "Mademoiselle de la Vallière, without fortune, birth, or beauty, is not the less on that account the only good match in the world for M. de Bragelonne, since he loves this young girl."

The king pressed his hands impatiently together.

"Does your Majesty hesitate?" inquired the count, without losing a particle either of his firmness or his politeness.

"I do not hesitate, — I refuse," replied the king.

Athos paused a moment, as if to collect himself. "I have had the honor," he said in a mild tone, "to observe to your Majesty that no obstacle now interferes with M. de Bragelonne's affections, and that his determination seems unalterable."

"There is my will, — and that is an obstacle, I should imagine!"

"That is the most serious of all," Athos replied quickly.

"Ah!"

"And may we therefore be permitted to ask your Majesty, with the greatest humility, for your reason for this refusal?"

"The reason! A question to me!" exclaimed the king.

"A demand, Sire!"

The king, leaning with both his hands upon the table, said in a deep tone of concentrated passion: "You have lost all recollection of what is usual at court. At court no one questions the king."

"Very true, Sire; but if men do not question, they conjecture."

"Conjecture! What may that mean, Monsieur?"

"Almost always the conjecture of the subject impugns the frankness of the king."

"Monsieur!"

"And a want of confidence on the part of the subject," pursued Athos, intrepidly.

"You are forgetting yourself," said the king, hurried away by his anger in spite of his control over himself.

"Sire, I am obliged to seek elsewhere for what I thought I should find in your Majesty. Instead of obtaining a reply from you, I am compelled to make one for myself."

The king rose. "Monsieur the Count," he said, "I have now given you all the time I had at my disposal."

This was a dismissal.

"Sire," replied the count, "I have not yet had time to tell your Majesty what I came with the express object of saying, and I so rarely see your Majesty that I ought to avail myself of the opportunity."

"Just now you spoke of conjectures; you are now becoming offensive, Monsieur."

"Oh, Sire, offend your Majesty! I? Never! All my life have I maintained that kings are above all other men, not only in rank and power, but in nobleness of heart and dignity of mind. I never can bring myself to believe that my sovereign — he who passed his word to me — did so with a mental reservation."

"What do you mean? What mental reservation?"

"I will explain my meaning," said Athos, coldly. "If in refusing Mademoiselle de la Vallière to M. de Bragelonne your Majesty had some other object in view than the happiness and fortune of the viscount —"

"You perceive, Monsieur, that you are offending me."

"If in requiring the viscount to delay his marriage your Majesty's only object was to remove the gentleman to whom Mademoiselle de la Vallière was engaged —"

"Monsieur! Monsieur!"

"I have heard it said so in every direction, Sire. Your Majesty's love for Mademoiselle de la Vallière is spoken of on all sides."

The king tore his gloves, which he had been biting for some time. "Woe to those," he cried, "who interfere in my affairs! I have chosen my course; I will crush all obstacles."

"What obstacles?" said Athos.

The king stopped short, like a runaway horse whose bit being turned in his mouth bruises his palate. "I love Mademoiselle de la Vallière," he said suddenly, with nobleness and with passion.

"But," interrupted Athos, "that does not preclude your Majesty from allowing M. de Bragelonne to marry Mademoiselle de la Vallière. The sacrifice is worthy of so great a monarch; it is fully merited by M. de Bragelonne,

who has already rendered great service to your Majesty, and who may well be regarded as a brave and worthy man. Your Majesty, therefore, in renouncing the affection you entertain, offers a proof at once of generosity, gratitude, and good policy."

"Mademoiselle de la Vallière does not love M. de Bragelonne," said the king, hoarsely.

"Does your Majesty know that to be the case?" remarked Athos, with a searching look.

"I do know it."

"Within a short time, then; for doubtless had your Majesty known it when I first preferred my request, you would have taken the trouble to inform me of it."

"Within a short time."

Athos remained silent for a moment, and then resumed: "In that case I do not understand why your Majesty should have sent M. de Bragelonne to London. That exile, and with good reason, is a matter of astonishment to all who love the honor of the king."

"Who presumes to speak of my honor, M. de la Fère?"

"The king's honor, Sire, is made up of the honor of his whole nobility. Whenever the king offends one of his gentlemen, — that is, whenever he deprives him of the smallest particle of his honor, — it is from him, from the king himself, that that portion of honor is stolen."

"M. de la Fère!" said the king, haughtily.

"Sire, you sent M. de Bragelonne to London either before you were Mademoiselle de la Vallière's lover or since you have become so."

The king, irritated beyond measure, especially because he felt that he was mastered, endeavored to dismiss Athos by a gesture.

"Sire," replied the count, "I will tell you all; I will not leave your presence until I have been satisfied either

by your Majesty or by myself, — satisfied if you prove to me that you are right, satisfied if I prove to you that you are wrong. Oh, you will listen to me, Sire! I am old now, and I am attached to everything that is really great and true in your kingdom. I am a gentleman who shed my blood for your father and for yourself, without ever having asked a single favor either from yourself or from your father. I have never inflicted the slightest wrong or injury on any one in this world, and have put kings under obligations to me. You will listen to me. I have come to ask you for an account of the honor of one of your servants whom you have deceived by a falsehood or betrayed through weakness. I know that these words irritate your Majesty; but on the other hand, the facts are killing us. I know you are inquiring what penalty you will inflict for my frankness; but I know what punishment I will implore God to inflict upon you when I set before him your perjury and my son's unhappiness."

The king during these remarks was walking hurriedly to and fro, his hand thrust into the breast of his coat, his head haughtily raised, his eyes blazing with wrath. "Monsieur," he cried suddenly, "if I acted towards you as the king, you would be already punished; but I am only a man, and I have the right to love in this world every one who loves me, — a happiness which is so rarely found."

"You cannot pretend to such a right as a man any more than as a king, Sire; or if you intended to exercise that right in a loyal manner, you should have told M. de Bragelonne so, and not have exiled him."

"I think I am condescending to dispute with you, Monsieur!" interrupted Louis XIV., with that majesty of air and manner which he alone was able to give to his look and his voice.

"I was hoping that you would reply to me," said the count.

"You shall know my reply, Monsieur, very soon."

"You already know my thoughts on the subject," was the Comte de la Fère's answer.

"You have forgotten you are speaking to the king, Monsieur. It is a crime."

"You have forgotten you are destroying the lives of two men, Sire. It is a mortal sin."

"Go! — at once!"

"Not until I have said to you · Son of Louis XIII., you begin your reign badly, for you begin it by abduction and disloyalty! My race — myself, too — are now freed from all that affection and respect towards you to which I bound my son by oath in the vaults of St. Denis, in the presence of the relics of your noble forefathers. You are now become our enemy, Sire; and henceforth we have nothing to do save with Heaven alone, our sole master. Be warned!"

"Do you threaten?"

"Oh, no!" said Athos, sadly; "I have as little bravado as fear in my soul. The God of whom I spoke to you is now listening to me. He knows that for the safety and honor of your crown I would even yet shed every drop of blood which twenty years of civil and foreign warfare have left in my veins. I can well say, then, that I threaten the king as little as I threaten the man; but I tell you, Sire, you lose two servants, — for you have destroyed faith in the heart of the father, and love in the heart of the son: the one ceases to believe in the royal word, the other no longer believes in the loyalty of man or the purity of woman; the one is dead to every feeling of respect, the other to obedience. Adieu!"

Thus saying, Athos broke his sword across his knee,

slowly placed the two pieces upon the floor, and saluting the king, who was almost choking from rage and shame, quitted the cabinet.

Louis, who sat near the table, completely overwhelmed, spent several minutes in recovering himself, then suddenly rose and rang the bell violently. "Tell M. d'Artagnan to come here," he said to the terrified ushers.

CHAPTER LXVI.

AFTER THE STORM.

Our readers will doubtless have been asking themselves how it happened that Athos, of whom not a word has been said for some time past, arrived so very opportunely at court. Our claim, as narrator, being that we unfold events in exact logical sequence, we hold ourselves ready to answer that question.

Porthos, faithful to his duty as an arranger of affairs, had immediately after leaving the Palais-Royal set off to join Raoul at the Minimes in the Bois de Vincennes, and had related everything, even to the smallest details, which had passed between De Saint-Aignan and himself. He finished by saying that the message which the king had sent to his favorite would not probably occasion more than a short delay, and that De Saint-Aignan, as soon as he could leave the king, would not lose a moment in accepting the invitation which Raoul had sent him.

But Raoul, less credulous than his old friend, had concluded, from Porthos's recital, that if De Saint-Aignan was going to the king, De Saint-Aignan would tell the king everything, and that the king would therefore forbid De Saint-Aignan to obey the summons he had received to the hostile meeting. The consequence of his reflections was that he had left Porthos to remain at the place appointed for the meeting, in the very improbable case that De Saint-Aignan would come there; and had urged Porthos not to remain there more than an hour or an hour and a half. Porthos, however, formally refused to

assent to that, but on the contrary installed himself in the Minimes as if he were going to take root there, making Raoul promise that when he had been to see his father, he would return to his own apartments, in order that Porthos's servant might know where to find him in case M. de Saint-Aignan should happen to come to the rendezvous.

Bragelonne had left Vincennes, and had proceeded at once straight to the apartments of Athos, who had been in Paris during the last two days, and had been already informed of what had taken place by a letter from D'Artagnan. Raoul arrived at his father's.

Athos, after having held out his hand to him, and embraced him most affectionately, made a sign for him to sit down. "I know you come to me as a man would go to a friend, Viscount, whenever he is suffering; tell me, therefore, what it is that brings you now."

The young man bowed, and began his recital; more than once in the course of it his tears choked his utterance, and a sob checked in his throat compelled him to pause in his narration. However, he finished at last. Athos most probably already knew how matters stood, as we have just now said that D'Artagnan had already written to him; but preserving until the conclusion that calm, unruffled composure of manner which constituted the almost superhuman side of his character, he replied: "Raoul, I do not believe there is a word of truth in the rumors; I do not believe in the existence of what you fear, although I do not deny that persons most entitled to the fullest credit have already conversed with me on the subject. In my heart and soul I think it impossible that the king could be guilty of such an outrage upon a gentleman. I will answer for the king, therefore, and will soon bring you back the proof of what I say."

Raoul, wavering like a drunken man between what he

had seen with his own eyes and the imperturbable faith he had in a man who had never told a falsehood, bowed, and simply answered, "Go, then, Monsieur the Count; I will await your return;" and he sat down, burying his face in his hands.

Athos dressed, and then left him in order to wait upon the king; what occurred in the interview with the king is already known to our readers.

When he returned to his lodgings, Raoul, pale and dejected, had not quitted his attitude of despair. At the sound, however, of the opening doors and of his father's footsteps, as he approached him, the young man raised his head. Athos's face was very pale, his head uncovered, and his manner full of seriousness; he gave his cloak and hat to the lackey, dismissed him with a gesture, and sat down near Raoul.

"Well, Monsieur," inquired the young man, "are you quite convinced now?"

"I am, Raoul; the king loves Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"He confesses it, then?" cried Raoul.

"Yes," replied Athos.

"And she?"

"I have not seen her."

"No; but the king spoke to you about her. What did he say?"

"He says that she loves him."

"Oh, you see, — you see, Monsieur!" said the young man, with a gesture of despair.

"Raoul," resumed the count, "I told the king, believe me, all that you yourself could possibly have said; and I believe I did so in becoming language, though sufficiently firm."

"And what did you say to him, Monsieur?"

"I told him, Raoul, that everything was now at an end between him and ourselves; that you would never serve him again. I told him that I, too, should remain aloof. Nothing further remains for me, then, but to be satisfied of one thing."

"What is that, Monsieur?"

"Whether you have determined to adopt any steps."

"Any steps? Regarding what?"

"With reference to your disappointed affection and —"

"Finish, Monsieur!"

"And with reference to revenge; for I fear that you think of avenging your wrongs."

"Oh, Monsieur, with regard to my affection, I shall perhaps, some day or other, succeed in tearing it from my heart; I trust I shall do so, aided by Heaven's merciful help and your wise exhortations. So far as vengeance is concerned, it occurred to me only when under the influence of an evil thought, for I could not revenge myself upon the one who is actually guilty; I have therefore already renounced every idea of revenge."

"And so you no longer think of seeking a quarrel with M. de Saint-Aignan?"

"No, Monsieur. I sent him a challenge. If he accepts it, I will maintain it; if he does not take it up, I will leave it where it is."

"And La Vallière?"

"You cannot, I know, have seriously thought that I should dream of revenging myself upon a woman?" replied Raoul, with a smile so sad that a tear started even to the eyes of his father, who had so many times in the course of his life been bowed beneath his own sorrows and those of others.

Athos held out his hand to Raoul, which the latter seized most eagerly.

"And so, Monsieur the Count, you are quite satisfied that the misfortune is without a remedy?" inquired the young man.

Athos shook his head. "Poor boy!" he murmured.

"You think that I still hope," said Raoul, "and you pity me. Oh, it is indeed a horrible suffering for me to despise, as I ought to do, her whom I have loved so devotedly. If I but had some real cause of complaint against her, I should be happy, and should be able to forgive her."

Athos looked at his son with a sorrowful air. The few words which Raoul had just pronounced seemed to have issued out of his own heart. At this moment the servant announced M. d'Artagnan. This name sounded very differently to the ears of Athos and of Raoul.

The musketeer entered the room with a vague smile upon his lips. Raoul paused. Athos walked towards his friend with an expression of face which did not escape Bragelonne. D'Artagnan answered Athos's look by a simple movement of the eyelid; and then, advancing towards Raoul, whom he took by the hand, he said, addressing both father and son, "Well, you are trying to console the boy, it seems."

"And you, kind and good as usual, are come to help me in my difficult task."

As he said this, Athos pressed D'Artagnan's hand between both his own. Raoul fancied he observed in this pressure something beyond the sense his mere words conveyed.

"Yes," replied the musketeer, smoothing his mustache with the hand that Athos had left free, — "yes, I have come also."

"You are most welcome, Chevalier; not for the consolation you bring with you, but on your own account. I am already consoled," said Raoul; and he attempted to

smile, but the effect was far more sad than any tears D'Artagnan had ever seen shed.

"That is all well and good, then," said D'Artagnan.

"Only," continued Raoul, "you have arrived just as the count was about to give me the details of his interview with the king. You will allow the count to continue?" added the young man, as with his eyes fixed on the musketeer he seemed to search the depths of his heart.

"His interview with the king?" said D'Artagnan, in a tone so natural and unassumed that there was no reason to doubt his astonishment. "You have seen the king then, Athos?"

Athos smiled as he said, "Yes, I have seen him."

"Ah, indeed! you were ignorant, then, that the count had seen his Majesty?" inquired Raoul, half reassured.

"My faith, yes! entirely."

"In that case I am less uneasy," said Raoul.

"Uneasy — and about what?" inquired Athos.

"Forgive me, Monsieur," said Raoul; "but knowing so well the regard and affection you have for me, I was afraid you might possibly have expressed somewhat plainly to his Majesty my own sufferings and your indignation, and that the king had consequently —"

"And that the king had consequently —" repeated D'Artagnan; "well, go on, finish what you were going to say."

"I have now to ask you to forgive me, M. d'Artagnan," said Raoul. "For a moment, and I cannot help confessing it, I trembled lest you had come here, not as M. d'Artagnan, but as captain of the Musketeers."

"You are mad, my poor boy," cried D'Artagnan, with a burst of laughter in which an exact observer might perhaps have desired a little more frankness.

"So much the better," said Raoul.

"Yes, mad; and do you know what I would advise you to do?"

"Tell me, Monsieur; for the advice is sure to be good, as it comes from you."

"Very well, then. I advise you, after your long journey from England, after your visit to M. de Guiche, after your visit to Madame, after your visit to Porthos, after your journey to Vincennes, — I advise you, I say, to take a few hours' rest; go and lie down, sleep for a dozen hours, and when you wake up, go and ride one of my horses until you have tired him to death." And drawing Raoul towards him, D'Artagnan embraced him as if he were his own child. Athos did the like; only, it was very apparent that the father's kiss was more tender and his embrace closer than those of the friend.

The young man again looked at his companions, endeavoring with the utmost strength of his intelligence to read what was in their minds; but his look was powerless upon the smiling countenance of the musketeer or upon the calm and composed features of the Comte de la Fère.

"Where are you going, Raoul?" inquired the latter, seeing that Bragelonne was preparing to go out.

"To my own apartments," replied Raoul, in his soft and sad voice.

"We shall be sure to find you there, then, if we should have anything to say to you?"

"Yes, Monsieur; but do you suppose it likely you will have something to say to me?"

"How can I tell?" said Athos.

"Yes, new consolations," said D'Artagnan, pushing him gently towards the door.

Raoul, observing the perfect composure which marked every gesture of his two friends, quitted the count's room, carrying away with him nothing but the individual feeling

of his own particular distress. "Thank Heaven!" he said; "since that is the case, I need only think of myself." And wrapping himself in his cloak, in order to conceal from the passers-by in the streets his gloomy face, he started out to return to his own rooms, as he had promised Porthos.

The two friends watched the young man as he walked away with a feeling akin to pity; only, each expressed it in a very different way.

"Poor Raoul!" said Athos, sighing deeply.

"Poor Raoul!" said D'Artagnan, shrugging his shoulders.

CHAPTER LXVII.

HEU ! MISER !

"Poor Raoul!" Athos had said; "Poor Raoul!" D'Artagnan had said: to be pitied by both these men, Raoul must indeed have been most unhappy. And when he found himself alone, face to face as it were with his own troubles, leaving behind him the intrepid friend and the indulgent father; when he recalled the avowal of the king's affection, which had robbed him of Louise de la Vallière, whom he loved so deeply, — he felt his heart almost breaking; as indeed we all have at least once in our lives, at the first illusion destroyed, at the first love betrayed. "Oh," he murmured, "all is over then! Nothing is now left me in this world, — nothing to look for, nothing to hope for! Guiche has told me so; my father has told me so, and M. d'Artagnan likewise. Everything is a mere idle dream in this life. That future which I have been hopelessly pursuing for the last ten years, a dream! that union of our hearts, a dream! that life formed of love and happiness, a dream! Poor fool, to publish my dreams in the face of my friends and my enemies, — that my friends may be saddened by my troubles and my enemies may laugh at my sorrows! So my unhappiness will soon become a notorious disgrace, a public scandal; so to-morrow I shall be ignominiously pointed at."

Despite the composure which he had promised his father and D'Artagnan to observe, Raoul could not resist uttering a few words of dark menace. "And yet," he

continued, "if my name were De Wardes, and if I had the pliant character and strength of will of M. d'Artagnan, I should laugh, with my lips at least; I should convince other women that this perfidious girl, honored by my love, leaves me only one regret, — that of having been deceived by her counterfeit of honesty. Some men might perhaps make favor with the king at my expense: I should put myself on the track of those jesters; I should chastise a few of them, — the men would fear me, and by the time I had laid three at my feet I should be adored by the women. Yes, yes; that indeed would be the proper course to adopt, and the Comte de la Fère himself would not object to it. Has not he also been tried, in his earlier days, in the same manner as I have just been tried myself? Did he not replace love by intoxication? He has often told me so. Why should not I replace love by pleasure? He must have suffered as much as I suffer, — even more so, perhaps. The history of one man is the history of all men, — a lengthened trial, of greater or less duration, more or less bitter or sorrowful. The voice of human nature is nothing but one prolonged cry. But what are the sufferings of others compared to those from which I am now suffering? Does the open wound in another's breast soften the pain of the gaping wound in our own? Or does the blood which is welling from another man's side stanch that which is pouring from our own? Does the general anguish of our fellow-creatures lessen our own private and particular anguish? No, no; each suffers on his own account, each struggles with his own grief, each sheds his own tears. And besides, what has my life been up to the present moment? A cold, barren, sterile arena, in which I have always fought for others, never for myself, — sometimes for a king, sometimes for a woman. The king has betrayed me; the woman disdained me. Miserable, un-

happy wretch that I am ! Women ! Can I not make all expiate the crime of one of their sex ? What does that require ? To have a heart no longer, or to forget that I ever had one ; to be strong, even against weakness itself ; to lean always, even when one feels that the support is giving way. What is needed to attain that result ? To be young, handsome, strong, valiant, rich. I am, or shall be, all that. But, honor ? What is honor, after all ? A theory which every man understands in his own way. My father tells me : ' Honor is the consideration of what is due to others, and particularly of what one owes to one's self.' But De Guiche and Manicamp, and De Saint-Aignan particularly, would say to me, ' Honor consists in serving the passions and pleasures of one's king.' Honor such as that, indeed, is easy and productive enough. With honor like that I can keep my post at the court, become a gentleman of the chamber, and have the command of a regiment. With honor such as that, I can be both duke and peer.

" The stain which that woman has just stamped upon me, the grief with which she has just broken my heart, — mine, Raoul's, her friend from childhood, — in no way affect M. de Bragelonne, an excellent officer, a courageous leader, who will cover himself with glory at the first encounter, and who will become a hundred times greater than Mademoiselle de la Vallière is to-day, the mistress of the king ; for the king will not marry her, — and the more publicly he proclaims her as his mistress, the more will he enlarge the band of shame which he places as a crown upon her brow ; and when others shall despise her as I despise her, I shall have become famous. Alas ! we had walked together side by side, she and I, during the earliest, the brightest, and best portion of our existence, hand in hand along the charming path of life, covered with the flowers

of youth; and now we come to a cross road, where she separates herself from me, whence we shall follow different roads, which will lead us always farther apart. And to attain the end of this path, oh, Heaven! I am alone, I am in despair, I am crushed. Oh, unhappy man that I am!"

Such were the sinister reflections in which Raoul was indulging when his foot mechanically paused at the door of his own dwelling. He had reached it without noticing the streets through which he had passed, without knowing how he had come; he pushed open the door, continued to advance, and ascended the staircase. The staircase, as in most of the houses at that period, was very dark, and the landings were obscure. Raoul lived on the first floor; he paused in order to ring. Olivain appeared, and took Raoul's sword and cloak from his hands. Raoul himself opened the door which from the antechamber led into a small salon, richly furnished enough for the salon of a young man, and completely filled with flowers by Olivain, who knowing his master's tastes had shown himself studiously attentive in gratifying them without caring whether his master perceived his attention or not. There was a portrait of La Vallière in the salon, which had been drawn by herself and given by her to Raoul. This portrait, fastened above a large easy-chair covered with dark-colored damask, was the first point towards which Raoul bent his steps, the first object on which he fixed his eyes. It was, moreover, Raoul's usual habit to do so; every time he entered his room, this portrait, before anything else, attracted his attention. This time, as usual, he walked straight up to the portrait, placed his knees upon the arm-chair, and paused to look at it sadly. His arms were crossed upon his breast, his head slightly thrown back, his eyes filled with tears, his lips curved in a bitter smile.

He looked at the portrait of her whom he so tenderly loved ; and then all that he had said passed before his mind again, and all that he had suffered assailed his heart. After a long silence he murmured for the third time, " Miserable, unhappy wretch that I am ! "

He had hardly pronounced these words, when he heard the sound of a sigh and a groan behind him. He turned sharply round, and perceived in the angle of the salon, standing up, a bending veiled female figure, which the opening door had concealed as he entered, and which, since he had not turned around, he had not perceived. He advanced towards this figure, whose presence in his room had not been announced to him ; and as he bowed, and inquired at the same moment who she was, she suddenly raised her head, and removed the veil from her face, revealing her pale and sorrow-stricken features.

Raoul staggered back, as if he had seen a ghost. " Louise ! " he cried, in a tone of such despair as one could hardly believe the human voice could express without breaking all the fibres of the heart.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

WOUNDS UPON WOUNDS.

MADEMOISELLE DE LA VALLIÈRE (for it was indeed she) advanced a few steps towards him. "Yes — Louise," she murmured.

But this interval, short as it had been, was quite sufficient for Raoul to recover himself. "You, Mademoiselle?" he said; and then added, in an indefinable tone, "You here!"

"Yes, Raoul," the young girl replied; "I have been waiting for you."

"I beg your pardon. When I came into the room I was not aware — "

"I know — but I entreated Olivain not to tell you — "

Louise hesitated; and as Raoul did not attempt to interrupt her, a moment's silence ensued, during which the sound of their throbbing hearts might have been heard, no longer in unison with each other, but the one beating as violently as the other. It was for Louise to speak, and she made an effort to do so. "I wished to speak to you," she said. "It was absolutely necessary that I should see you — myself — alone. I have not hesitated to adopt a step which must remain secret; for no one, except yourself, could understand my motive, M. de Bragelonne."

"In fact, Mademoiselle," Raoul stammered out, almost breathless from emotion, "so far as I am concerned, and despite the good opinion you have of me, I confess —"

"Will you do me the great kindness to sit down and listen to me?" said Louise, interrupting him with her soft, sweet voice.

Bragelonne looked at her for a moment; then, mournfully shaking his head, he sat, or rather fell down, on a chair. "Speak!" he said.

Louise cast a glance all round her. This look was a timid entreaty, and implored secrecy far more effectually than her expressed words had done a few minutes before.

Raoul rose, and went to the door, which he opened. "Olivain," he said, "I am not within for any one;" and then, turning towards Louise, he added, "Is not that what you wished?"

Nothing could have produced a greater effect upon Louise than these few words which seemed to signify, "You see that I still understand you." She passed a handkerchief across her eyes, in order to remove a rebellious tear; and then, having collected herself for a moment, she said: "Raoul, do not turn your kind, frank look away from me! You are not one of those men who despise a woman for having given her heart to another, even though that love might render him unhappy or might wound his pride."

Raoul did not reply.

"Alas!" continued La Vallière, "it is only too true. My cause is a bad one, and I know not in what way to begin. It will be better for me, I think, to relate to you very simply everything that has befallen me. As I shall speak the truth, I shall always find my path clear before me in the obscurity, hesitation, and obstacles which I have to brave in order to solace my heart, which is full to overflowing, and wishes to pour itself out at your feet."

Raoul continued to preserve the same unbroken silence.

La Vallière looked at him with an air that seemed to say, "Encourage me; for pity's sake, but a single word!" But Raoul did not open his lips; and the young girl was obliged to continue.

"Just now," she said, "M. de Saint-Aignan came to me by the king's directions." She cast down her eyes as she said this; while Raoul, on his side, turned his away, in order to avoid looking at her. "M. de Saint-Aignan came to me from the king," she repeated, "and told me that you knew all;" and she attempted to look Raoul in the face, after inflicting this further wound upon him in addition to the many others he had already received; but it was impossible to meet Raoul's eyes.

"He told me you were incensed with me, — justly so, I admit."

This time Raoul looked at the young girl, and a smile full of disdain passed across his lips.

"Oh," she continued, "I entreat you, do not say that you have had any other feeling against me than that of anger merely! Raoul, wait until I have told you all, — wait until I have said to you all that I had to say, all that I came to say!"

Raoul, by the strength of his own iron will, forced his features to assume a calmer expression; and the disdainful smile upon his lip passed away.

"In the first place," said La Vallière, — "in the first place, with my hands raised in entreaty towards you, with my forehead bowed to the ground before you, I entreat you, as the most generous, as the noblest of men, to pardon, to forgive me. If I have left you in ignorance of what was passing in my own bosom, never, at least, would I have consented to deceive you. Oh, I entreat you, Raoul, — I implore you on my knees, — answer me one word, even though you wrong me in doing so! Better

an injurious word from your lips than a suspicion in your heart!"

"I admire your subtlety of expression, Mademoiselle," said Raoul, making an effort to remain calm. "To leave another in ignorance that you are deceiving him is loyal; but to deceive him — it seems that that would be very wrong, and that you would not do it."

"Monsieur, for a long time I thought that I loved you better than anything else; and so long as I believed in my love for you, I told you that I loved you. At Blois I loved you. The king visited Blois; I believed I loved you still. I could have sworn it on the altar; but a day came when I was undeceived."

"Well, on that day, Mademoiselle, knowing that I still continued to love you, true loyalty of conduct ought to have obliged you to tell me you had ceased to love me."

"But on that day, Raoul, — on that day, when I read in the depths of my own heart, when I confessed to myself that you no longer filled my mind entirely, when I saw another future before me than that of being your friend, your life-long companion, your wife, — on that day, Raoul, you were not, alas! any more beside me."

"But you knew where I was, Mademoiselle; you could have written to me."

"Raoul, I did not dare to do so. Raoul, I have been weak and cowardly. I knew you so thoroughly — I knew how devotedly you loved me — that I trembled at the bare idea of the grief I was going to cause you; and that is so true, Raoul, that at this very moment I am now speaking to you, bending thus before you, my heart crushed in my bosom, my voice full of sighs, my eyes full of tears, — it is so perfectly true, that I have no other defence than my frankness, I have no other sorrow greater than that which I read in your eyes."

Raoul attempted to smile.

"No," said the young girl, with a profound conviction, "no, no; you will not do me so foul a wrong as to disguise your feelings before me now! You loved me, you were sure of your affection for me, you did not deceive yourself, you did not lie to your own heart; while I — I — " And pale as death, her arms thrown despairingly above her head, she fell upon her knees.

"While you," said Raoul, — "you told me you loved me, and yet you loved another."

"Alas, yes!" cried the poor girl, — "alas, yes! I do love another; and that other — oh, for Heaven's sake, let me say it, Raoul, for it is my only excuse — that other I love better than my own life, better than my own soul even. Forgive my fault or punish my treason, Raoul. I came here in no way to defend myself, but merely to say to you, 'You know what it is to love!' Well, I love! I love to that degree that I would give my life, my very soul, to the man I love. If he should ever cease to love me, I shall die of grief and despair, unless God helps me, unless the Lord shows pity upon me. Raoul, I came here to submit myself to your will, whatever it might be, — to die, if it were your wish I should die. Kill me, then, Raoul, if in your heart you believe I deserve death!"

"Take care, Mademoiselle!" said Raoul; "the woman who invites death is one who has nothing but her heart's blood to offer to her deceived and betrayed lover."

"You are right," she said.

Raoul uttered a deep sigh as he exclaimed, "And you love without being able to forget!"

"I love without a wish to forget, without a wish ever to love any one else," replied La Vallière.

"Very well," said Raoul. "You have said to me, in fact, all you had to say, all I could possibly wish to know.

And now, Mademoiselle, it is I who ask your forgiveness; for it is I who have almost been an obstacle in your life. I, too, have been wrong; for in deceiving myself I helped to deceive you."

"Oh," said La Vallière, "I do not ask you so much as that, Raoul!"

"I only am to blame, Mademoiselle," continued Raoul. "Better informed than yourself of the difficulties of this life, I should have enlightened you. I ought not to have relied upon uncertainty; I ought to have extracted an answer from your heart, while I hardly even sought an acknowledgment from your lips. Once more, Mademoiselle, it is I who ask your forgiveness."

"Impossible, impossible!" she cried; "you are mocking me."

"How, impossible?"

"Yes, it is impossible to be good and excellent and perfect to such a degree as that."

"Take care!" said Raoul, with a bitter smile; "for presently you may say perhaps that I did not love you."

"Oh, you love me like an affectionate brother; let me hope that, Raoul."

"As a brother! Undeceive yourself, Louise! I loved you as a lover, as a husband, with the deepest, the truest, the fondest affection."

"Raoul, Raoul!"

"As a brother! Oh, Louise! I loved you so much that I would have given all my blood for you, drop by drop; all my flesh, shred by shred; all my eternity, hour by hour."

"Raoul! Raoul! for pity's sake!"

"I loved you so much, Louise, that my heart is dead, my faith is extinguished, my eyes have lost their light. I

loved you so much that I see nothing more either on earth or in heaven."

"Raoul, dear Raoul! spare me, I implore you!" cried La Vallière. "Oh, if I had known —"

"It is too late, Louise. You love, you are happy; I read your happiness through your tears, — behind the tears which the loyalty of your nature makes you shed; I feel the sighs which your love breathes forth. Louise, Louise, you have made me the most abjectly wretched man living; leave me, I entreat you! Adieu! adieu!"

"Forgive me, I entreat you!"

"Have I not done more? Have I not told you that I love you still?" She buried her face in her hands. "And to tell you that, — do you understand me, Louise? — to tell you that at such a moment as this, to tell you that as I have told you, is to pronounce my own sentence of death. Adieu!"

La Vallière wished to hold out her hands to him.

"We ought not to see each other again in this world," he said; and as she was on the point of calling out in bitter agony at this remark, he placed his hand on her mouth to stifle the exclamation. She pressed her lips upon it and fell fainting.

"Olivain," said Raoul, "take this young lady and bear her to the carriage which is waiting for her at the door."

As Olivain lifted her up, Raoul made a movement towards La Vallière, as if to give her a first and last kiss: but stopping abruptly, he said, "No, she is not mine; I am not the King of France, to steal!" And he returned to his room; while the lackey carried La Vallière, still fainting, to the carriage.

CHAPTER LXIX.

WHAT RAOUL HAD GUESSED.

After Raoul's departure, and the two exclamations which had followed him, Athos and D'Artagnan found themselves alone, face to face. Athos immediately resumed the earnest manner which had possessed him when D'Artagnan arrived.

"Well," Athos said, "what have you come to announce to me, my friend?"

"I?" inquired D'Artagnan.

"Yes; I do not see you in this way without some reason for it," said Athos, smiling.

"The deuce!" said D'Artagnan.

"I will place you at your ease. The king is furious, is he not?"

"Well, I must say he is not altogether pleased."

"And you have come —"

"By his direction; yes."

"To arrest me, then?"

"My dear friend, you have hit the very mark."

"Oh, I expected it! Come!"

"Oh! oh! The devil!" said D'Artagnan; "what a hurry you are in!"

"I am afraid of delaying you," said Athos, smiling.

"I have plenty of time. Are you not curious, besides, to know how things went on between the king and me?"

"If you will be good enough to tell me, I will listen with the greatest pleasure," said Athos, pointing out to

D'Artagnan a large chair, in which the latter stretched himself in an easy attitude.

"Well, I will do so willingly enough," continued D'Artagnan, "for the conversation is rather interesting. In the first place, the king sent for me."

"As soon as I had left?"

"You were just going down the last steps of the staircase, as the musketeers told me. I arrived. My dear Athos, the king was not red in the face merely, he was positively purple. I was not aware, of course, of what had passed; only I saw a sword broken in two lying on the floor. 'Captain d'Artagnan,' cried the king, as soon as he saw me. 'Sire,' I replied. 'I abandon M. de la Fère; he is an insolent man.' 'An insolent man!' I exclaimed, in such a tone that the king stopped suddenly short. 'Captain d'Artagnan,' resumed the king, with his teeth clinched, 'you will listen to me and obey me.' 'That is my duty, Sire.' 'I have wished to spare that gentleman, of whom I retain some kind recollections, the affront of having him arrested in my presence.' 'Ah! ah!' I said quietly. 'But you will take a carriage.' At this I made a slight movement. 'If you object to arrest him yourself,' continued the king, 'send me my captain of the Guards.' 'Sire,' I replied, 'there is no necessity for the captain of the Guards, since I am on duty.' 'I should not like to annoy you,' said the king, kindly, 'for you have always served me well, M. d'Artagnan.' 'You do not annoy me, Sire,' I replied; 'I am on duty, that is all.' 'But,' said the king, in astonishment, 'I believe the count is your friend?' 'If he were my father, Sire, it would not make me less on duty than I am.' The king looked at me; he saw how unmoved my face was, and seemed satisfied. 'You will arrest M. le Comte de la Fère, then?' he inquired. 'Most certainly, Sire, if you

give me the order to do so.' 'Very well; I order you to do so.' I bowed and replied, 'Where is the count, Sire?' 'You will look for him.' 'And I am to arrest him wherever he may be?' 'Yes; but at his own house if possible. If he has started for his own estate, leave Paris at once, and arrest him on his way thither.' I bowed; but as I did not move, he said, 'Well?' 'I am waiting, Sire.' 'What are you waiting for?' 'For the signed order.' The king seemed annoyed; for in point of fact it was the exercise of a fresh act of authority, — a repetition of the arbitrary act, if indeed it is to be considered as such. He took his pen slowly, and in no very good temper; then he wrote, 'Order for M. le Chevalier d'Artagnan, captain of my Musketeers, to arrest M. le Comte de la Fère, wherever he is to be found.' He then turned towards me; but I was looking on without moving a muscle of my face. In all probability he thought he perceived something like bravado in my tranquil manner, for he signed hurriedly; and then handing me the order, he said, 'Go!' I obeyed; and here I am."

Athos pressed his friend's hand. "Well, let us set off," he said.

"Oh! surely," said D'Artagnan, "you must have some trifling matters to arrange before you leave your apartments in this manner?"

"I? Not at all."

"Why not?"

"Why, you know, D'Artagnan, I have always been a very simple traveller on this earth, ready to go to the end of the world by the order of my sovereign, ready to quit it at the summons of my Maker. What does a man who is thus prepared require in such a case? — a portmanteau or a shroud. I am ready at this moment, as I have always been, dear friend, and can accompany you at once."

"But Bragelonne —"

"I have brought him up in the same principles I laid down for my own guidance; and you observed that as soon as he perceived you he guessed, that very moment, the motive of your visit. We have thrown him off his guard for a moment; but do not be uneasy, — he is sufficiently prepared for my disgrace not to be too much alarmed at it. So, let us go."

"Very well, let us go," said D'Artagnan, quietly.

"As I broke my sword in the king's presence, and threw the pieces at his feet, I presume that will dispense with the necessity of delivering it over to you."

"You are quite right; and besides that, what the devil do you suppose I could do with your sword?"

"Am I to walk behind or before you?" inquired Athos, laughing.

"You will walk arm-in-arm with me," replied D'Artagnan, as he took the count's arm to descend the staircase, and in this manner they arrived at the landing. Grimaud, whom they had met in the anteroom, looked at them, as they went out together in this manner, with some little uneasiness, his experience of affairs was quite sufficient to give him good reason to suspect that there was something wrong.

"Ah! is that you, Grimaud?" said Athos, kindly. "We are going —"

"To take a turn in my carriage," interrupted D'Artagnan, with a friendly nod of the head.

Grimaud thanked D'Artagnan by a grimace, which was evidently intended for a smile, and accompanied the two friends to the door. Athos entered first into the carriage; D'Artagnan followed him, without saying a word to the coachman. The departure had taken place so quietly that it excited no disturbance or attention even in the neigh-

borhood. When the carriage had reached the quays, "You are taking me to the Bastille, I perceive," said Athos.

"I?" said D'Artagnan. "I take you wherever you may choose to go; nowhere else, I can assure you."

"What do you mean?" said the count, surprised.

"*Pardieu!*" said D'Artagnan, "you quite understand that I undertook the mission with no other object in view than that of carrying it out exactly as you liked. You did not think that I would have you thrown into prison like that, brutally, without reflection. If I had anticipated that, I should have let the captain of the Guards undertake it."

"And so —" said Athos.

"And so, I repeat, we will go wherever you may choose."

"My dear friend," said Athos, embracing D'Artagnan, "how like you that is!"

"Well, it seems simple enough to me. The coachman will take you to the barrier of the Cours-la-Reine; you will find a horse there which I have ordered to be kept ready for you; with that horse you will be able to do three posts without stopping; and I, on my side, will take care not to return to the king, to tell him that you have gone away, until it will be impossible to overtake you. In the mean time you will have reached Havre, and from Havre you will go to England, where you will find the charming residence which my friend M. Monk gave me, — to say nothing of the hospitality which King Charles will not fail to show you. Well, what do you think of this project?"

"Take me to the Bastille," said Athos, smiling.

"You are an obstinate-headed fellow, dear Athos," returned D'Artagnan; "reflect for a few moments."

"Upon what?"

"That you are no longer twenty years of age. Believe me, — I speak according to my own knowledge and experience, — a prison is certain death for men of our time of life. No, no; I will never allow you to languish in prison. Why, the very thought of it turns my head."

"Dear D'Artagnan," Athos replied, "happily God made me as strong in body as in mind; and rely upon it, I shall retain my strength up to the very last moment."

"But this is not force; it is folly."

"No, D'Artagnan, it is the highest order of reasoning. Do not suppose that I should in the slightest degree in the world discuss the question with you, whether you would not be ruined in endeavoring to save me. I should have done precisely as you have arranged, if flight had seemed proper to me; I should therefore have accepted from you what without any doubt you would have accepted from me. No! I know you too well even to breathe a word upon the subject."

"Ah, if you would only let me do it," said D'Artagnan, "how I would send the king running after you!"

"He is the king, dear friend."

"Oh, that is all the same to me; and king though he be, I would plainly tell him, 'Sire! imprison, exile, kill every one in France and Europe; order me to arrest, and even poniard whom you like, — even were it Monsieur, your own brother; but do not touch one of the four musketeers, or, if so, *mordioux!*'"

"My dear friend," replied Athos, quietly, "I should like to persuade you of one thing; namely, that I wish to be arrested, — that I desire above all things that my arrest should take place." D'Artagnan made a movement of his shoulders. "What does that mean? It is so. If you were to let me escape, it would be only to return of my

own accord, and constitute myself a prisoner. I wish to prove to this young man, who is dazzled by the power and splendor of his crown, that he can be regarded as the first among men only by proving himself to be the most generous and the wisest among them. He may punish, imprison, or torture me, — it matters not. He abuses his opportunities, and I wish him to learn the bitterness of remorse, while Heaven teaches him what a chastisement is."

"Well, well," replied D'Artagnan, "I know only too well that when you have once said 'No,' you mean 'No.' I do not insist any longer. You wish to go to the Bastille?"

"I do wish to go there."

"Let us go, then! To the Bastille!" cried D'Artagnan to the coachman; and throwing himself back in the carriage, he gnawed the ends of his mustache with a fury which to Athos, who knew him well, signified a resolution either already taken or in course of formation. A profound silence ensued in the carriage, which continued to roll on, but neither faster nor slower than before.

Athos took the musketeer by the hand. "You are not angry with me, D'Artagnan?" he said.

"I? Oh, no! certainly not, of course not! What you do from heroism, I should have done from sheer obstinacy."

"But you are quite of opinion, are you not, that Heaven will avenge me, D'Artagnan?"

"And I know some persons on earth who will lend a helping hand," said the captain.

CHAPTER LXX.

THREE GUESTS ASTONISHED TO FIND THEMSELVES AT SUPPER TOGETHER.

THE carriage arrived at the outside gate of the Bastille. A soldier on guard stopped it; but D'Artagnan had only to utter a single word to procure admittance, and the carriage passed on. While they were proceeding along the covered way which led to the courtyard of the governor's residence, D'Artagnan, whose lynx eye saw everything, even through the walls, suddenly cried out, "What is that out yonder?"

"Well," said Athos, quietly, "what is it?"

"Look yonder, Athos!"

"In the courtyard?"

"Yes, yes; make haste!"

"Well, a carriage; very likely conveying a prisoner like myself."

"That would be too droll."

"I do not understand you."

"Make haste and look again, and look at the man who is just getting out of that carriage."

At that very moment a second sentinel stopped D'Artagnan; and while the formalities were gone through, Athos could see at a hundred paces from him the man whom his friend had pointed out to him. He was, in fact, getting out of the carriage at the door of the governor's house. "Well," inquired D'Artagnan, "do you see him?"

"Yes; he is a man in a gray suit."

"What do you say of him?"

"I cannot very well tell. He is, as I have just now told you, a man in a gray suit, who is getting out of a carriage; that is all."

"Athos, I will wager anything it is he."

"He? — who?"

"Aramis."

"Aramis arrested? Impossible!"

"I do not say he is arrested, since we see him alone in his carriage."

"Well, then, what is he doing here?"

"Oh, he knows Baisemeaux, the governor!" replied the musketeer, slyly. "My faith! we have arrived just in time."

"What for?"

"In order to see what we can see."

"I regret this meeting exceedingly. When Aramis sees me, he will be very much annoyed, — in the first place at seeing me, and in the next at being seen."

"Very well reasoned."

"Unfortunately, there is no remedy for it. Whenever any one meets another in the Bastille, even if he wished to draw back to avoid him, it would be impossible."

"Athos, I have an idea: the question is, to spare Aramis the annoyance you were speaking of, is it not?"

"What is to be done?"

"I will tell you; or, in order better to explain myself, let me relate the affair in my own manner. I will not recommend you to tell a falsehood, for that would be impossible for you to do."

"Well, what is it?"

"Well, I will lie for both of us; it is so easy to do that, with the nature and habits of a Gascon."

Athos smiled. The carriage stopped where the one we have just now pointed out had stopped; namely, at the door of the governor's house.

"It is understood, then?" said D'Artagnan, in a low voice to his friend.

Athos consented by a gesture.

They ascended the staircase. There will be no occasion for surprise at the facility with which they had entered into the Bastille, if it be remembered that before passing the first gate — in fact, the most difficult of all — D'Artagnan had announced that he had brought a prisoner of State. At the third gate, on the contrary, — that is to say, when he had once fairly entered the prison, — he merely said to the sentinel, "To M. Baisemeaux;" and they both passed on. In a few minutes they were in the governor's dining-room; and the first face which attracted D'Artagnan's observation was that of Aramis, who was seated side by side with Baisemeaux, and awaited the announcement of a good meal, whose odor impregnated the whole apartment. If D'Artagnan pretended surprise, Aramis did not pretend at all; he started when he saw his two friends, and his emotion was very apparent. Athos and D'Artagnan, however, made their salutations; and Baisemeaux, amazed, completely stupefied by the presence of those three guests, began to perform a few evolutions around them.

"Ah, there!" said Aramis, "by what chance —"

"We were just going to ask you," retorted D'Artagnan.

"Are we going to give ourselves up as prisoners?" cried Aramis, with an affectation of hilarity.

"Ah! ah!" said D'Artagnan; "it is true the walls smell deucedly like a prison. M. de Baisemeaux, you know you invited me to sup with you the other day."

"I?" cried Baisemeaux.

"Ah! one would say you had fallen from the clouds. You have no recollection of it?"

Baisemeaux turned pale and then red; looked at Aramis, who looked at him; and finally stammered, "Certainly — I am delighted — but — upon my honor — I have not the slightest — Ah! I have such a wretched memory."

"Well, I am wrong, I see," said D'Artagnan, as if he were offended.

"Wrong, how?"

"Wrong to remember, it seems."

Baisemeaux hurried towards him. "Do not stand on ceremony, my dear captain," he said. "I have the poorest head in the kingdom. Take me from my pigeons and their pigeon-house, and I am no better than the rawest recruit."

"At all events, you remember it now," said D'Artagnan, boldly.

"Yes, yes," replied the governor, hesitating; "I think I remember."

"It was when you came to the palace to see me; you told me some story or other about your accounts with M. de Louvière and M. de Tremblay."

"Oh, yes! perfectly."

"And about M. d'Herblay's kindness to you."

"Ah!" exclaimed Aramis, looking the unhappy governor full in the face; "and yet you just now said you had no memory, M. de Baisemeaux."

Baisemeaux interrupted the musketeer in the midst of his revelations. "Yes, yes, you 're quite right; it seems to me that I am still there. I beg a thousand pardons. But now, once for all, my dear M. d'Artagnan, be sure that at this present time, as at any other, whether invited or not, you are master here, — you and M. d'Herblay,

your friend," he said, turning towards Aramis; "and this gentleman too," he added, bowing to Athos.

"Well, I thought it would be sure to turn out so," replied D'Artagnan. "This is the occasion of my coming: Having nothing to do this evening at the Palais-Royal, I wished to judge for myself what your ordinary style of living was like; and as I was coming along I met Monsieur the Count." Athos bowed. "The count, who had just left his Majesty, handed me an order which required immediate attention. We were close by here; I wished to call in, even if it were for no other object than that of shaking hands with you and of presenting the count to you, of whom you spoke so highly in the king's presence that very evening when —"

"Certainly, certainly — M. le Comte de la Fère, is it not?"

"Precisely."

"Monsieur the Count is welcome."

"And he will sup with you two, I suppose; while I, unfortunate dog that I am, must run off on a matter of duty. Oh, what happy beings you are, compared to myself!" D'Artagnan added, sighing as loud as Porthos might have done.

"And so you are going away?" said Aramis and Baisemeaux together, with the same expression of delighted surprise, the tone of which was immediately noticed by D'Artagnan.

"I leave you in my place," he said, "a noble and excellent guest;" and he touched Athos gently on the shoulder, who, astonished also, could not help exhibiting his surprise a little, — which was noticed by Aramis only, for M. de Baisemeaux was not quite equal to the three friends in point of intelligence.

"What! are you going to leave us?" resumed the governor.

"I shall be away only about an hour or an hour and a half. I will return in time for dessert."

"Oh, we will wait for you!" said Baisemeaux.

"No, no; that would be really disobliging me."

"You will be sure to return, though?" said Athos, with an expression of doubt.

"Most certainly," he said, pressing his friend's hand confidentially; and he added in a low voice, "Wait for me, Athos; be cheerful and lively as possible, and above all, don't allude to business affairs, for Heaven's sake!" and a renewed pressure of the hand impressed upon the count the necessity of being discreet and impenetrable.

Baisemeaux led D'Artagnan to the gate. Aramis, with many friendly protestations of delight, sat down by Athos, determined to make him speak; but Athos possessed all the virtues in their highest excellence. If necessity had required it, he would have been the finest orator in the world; but when there was need of silence he would die rather than utter a syllable.

Ten minutes after D'Artagnan's departure, the three gentlemen sat down to table, which was covered with the most substantial display of gastronomic luxury. Large joints, exquisite dishes, preserves, the greatest variety of wines, appeared successively upon the table, which was served at the king's expense, and of which expense M. Colbert would have no difficulty in saving two thirds, without any one in the Bastille being the worse for it.

Baisemeaux was the only one who ate and drank resolutely. Aramis allowed nothing to pass by him, but merely touched everything he took; Athos, after the soup and three *hors d'œuvres*, ate nothing more. The style of

conversation was such as it necessarily would be between three men so opposite in temper and ideas.

Aramis was incessantly asking himself by what extraordinary chance Athos was at Baisemeaux's when D'Artagnan was no longer there, and why D'Artagnan did not remain when Athos was there. Athos sounded all the depths of the mind of Aramis, who lived in the midst of subterfuge, evasion, and intrigue; he studied his man well and thoroughly, and felt convinced that he was engaged upon some important project. And then he too began to think of his own personal affair, and to lose himself in conjectures as to D'Artagnan's reason for having left the Bastille so abruptly, and for leaving behind him a prisoner so badly introduced and so badly looked after by the prison authorities.

But we shall not pause to examine into the thoughts and feelings of these personages; we will leave them to themselves, surrounded by the remains of poultry, game, and fish, mutilated by the generous knife of Baisemeaux. We are going to follow D'Artagnan instead, who, getting into the carriage which had brought him, cried out to the coachman, "To the king! and burn the pavement!"

CHAPTER LXXI.

WHAT TOOK PLACE AT THE LOUVRE DURING THE SUPPER AT THE BASTILLE.

M. DE SAINT-AIGNAN had executed the commission with which the king had intrusted him for La Vallière, as we have already seen in one of the preceding chapters; but whatever his eloquence might have been, he did not succeed in persuading the young girl that she had in the king a protector powerful enough for her under any combination of circumstances, and that she had no need of any one else in the world when the king was on her side. In point of fact, at the very first word which the favorite mentioned of the discovery of the famous secret, Louise, in a passion of tears, abandoned herself in utter despair to a sorrow which would have been far from flattering for the king, if he had been a witness of it from a corner of the room. De Saint-Aignan, in his character of ambassador, felt greatly offended at it, as his master himself would have been, and returned to announce to the king what he had seen and heard. It is there that we now find him, in a state of great agitation, in the presence of the king, still more agitated than he.

"But," said the king to the courtier, when the latter had finished his report, "what did she decide to do? Shall I, at least, see her presently before supper? Will she come to me, or shall I be obliged to go to her room?"

"I believe, Sire, that if your Majesty wishes to see her, you will not only have to take the first step in advance, but will have to go the whole way."

"Nothing for me! Does that Bragelonne still possess her heart?" muttered the king between his teeth.

"Oh, Sire, that is not possible; for it is you alone whom Mademoiselle de la Vallière loves, and that, too, with all her heart. But you know that De Bragelonne belongs to that proud race who play the part of Roman heroes."

The king smiled feebly; he knew how true the illustration was, for Athos had just left him.

"As for Mademoiselle de la Vallière," De Saint-Aignan continued, "she was brought up under the care of the Dowager Madame; that is to say, in austere retirement. This engaged young couple coldly exchanged their little vows in the presence of the moon and the stars; and now, when they find they have to break those vows, it plays the very deuce with them."

De Saint-Aignan thought he should have made the king laugh; but on the contrary, from a mere smile Louis passed to the greatest seriousness of manner. He already began to experience that remorse which the count had promised D'Artagnan he would inflict upon him. He reflected that, in fact, these young persons had loved and sworn fidelity to each other; that one of the two had kept his word, and that the other was too conscientious not to feel her perjury most bitterly; and with remorse, jealousy sharply pricked the king's heart. He did not say another word; and instead of going to pay a visit to his mother or the queen or Madame, in order to amuse himself a little and make the ladies laugh, as he himself used to say, he threw himself into the huge arm-chair in which his august father, Louis XIII., had passed so many weary days and years in company with Baradas and Cinq-Mars.

De Saint-Aignan perceived that the king was not to

be amused at that moment; he tried a last resource, and pronounced Louise's name, which made the king look up immediately. "What does your Majesty intend to do this evening? Shall Mademoiselle de la Vallière be informed of your intention to see her?"

"It seems she is already aware of that," replied the king. "No, no, Saint-Aignan," he continued, after a moment's pause; "we will both of us pass our time in dreaming. When Mademoiselle de la Vallière shall have sufficiently regretted what she now regrets, she will deign, perhaps, to give us some news of herself."

"Ah, Sire, is it possible you can so misunderstand that devoted heart?"

The king rose, flushed with vexation; he was a prey to jealousy in its turn. De Saint-Aignan was just beginning to feel that his position was becoming awkward, when the curtain before the door was raised. The king turned hastily round. His first idea was that a letter from Louise had arrived; but instead of a letter of love, he saw only his captain of Musketeers standing upright and silent in the doorway. "M. d'Artagnan!" he said. "Ah! well, Monsieur?"

D'Artagnan looked at De Saint-Aignan; Louis's eyes took the same direction as those of his captain. These looks would have been clear to any one, and they were especially so to De Saint-Aignan. The courtier bowed and quitted the room, leaving the king and D'Artagnan alone.

"*Is it done?*" inquired the king.

"Yes, Sire," replied the captain of the Musketeers, in a grave voice, "it is done!"

The king was unable to say another word. Pride, however, obliged him not to pause there. Whenever a sovereign has adopted a decisive course, even though it be

unjust, he is compelled to prove to all witnesses, and particularly to himself, that he was quite right in so adopting it. A good means for effecting that — an almost infallible means, indeed — is to try to prove his victim to be in the wrong. Louis, brought up by Mazarin and Anne of Austria, knew better than any one else his vocation as a monarch; he therefore endeavored to prove it on the present occasion. After a few moments' pause, which he had employed in making silently to himself the same reflections which we have just expressed aloud, he said in an indifferent tone, "What did the count say?"

"Nothing at all, Sire."

"Surely he did not allow himself to be arrested without saying something?"

"He said he expected to be arrested, Sire."

The king raised his head haughtily. "I presume," he said, "that M. le Comte de la Fère has not continued to play his obstinate and rebellious part?"

"In the first place, Sire, what do you term rebellious?" quietly asked the musketeer. "Is that man a rebel, in the eyes of the king, who not only allows himself to be shut up in the Bastille, but who even opposes those who do not wish to take him there?"

"Who do not wish to take him there!" exclaimed the king. "What do you say, Captain? Are you mad?"

"I believe not, Sire."

"You speak of persons who did not wish to arrest M. de la Fère?"

"Yes, Sire."

"And who are they?"

"Those whom your Majesty intrusted with that duty, apparently."

"But it is you whom I intrusted with it," exclaimed the king.

"Yes, Sire; it is I."

"And you say that, despite my orders, you had the intention of not arresting the man who had insulted me!"

"Yes, Sire, that was really my intention. I even proposed to the count to mount a horse that I had had prepared for him at the Barrière de la Conférence."

"And what was your object in getting this horse ready?"

"Why, Sire, in order that M. le Comte de la Fère might be able to reach Havre, and from that place make his escape to England."

"You betrayed me then, Monsieur?" cried the king, kindling with a wild pride.

"Exactly so."

There was nothing to say in answer to statements made in such a tone; the king was astounded at such an obstinate and open resistance on the part of D'Artagnan. "At least you had a reason, M. d'Artagnan, for acting as you did?" said the king, proudly.

"I have always a reason, Sire."

"Your reason cannot be your friendship for the count, at all events, — the only one that can be of any avail, the only one that could possibly excuse you, — for I placed you entirely at your ease in that respect."

"Me, Sire?"

"Did I not give you the choice to arrest or not to arrest M. le Comte de la Fère?"

"Yes, Sire; but — "

"But what?" exclaimed the king, impatiently.

"But you warned me, Sire, that if I did not arrest him, your captain of the Guards should do so."

"Was I not considerate enough towards you when I did not compel you to obey me?"

"To me, Sire, you were, but not to my friend; for my

friend would be arrested all the same, whether by myself or by the captain of the Guards."

"And this is your devotion, Monsieur, — a devotion which argues and reasons! You are no soldier, Monsieur!"

"I wait for your Majesty to tell me what I am."

"Well, then, — you are a Frondeur."

"And since there is no longer any Fronde, Sire, in that case — "

"But if what you say is true — "

"What I say is always true, Sire."

"What have you come to say to me, Monsieur?"

"I have come to say to your Majesty: Sire, M. de la Fère is in the Bastille."

"That is not your fault, it would seem."

"That is true, Sire. But, at all events, he is there; and since he is there, it is important that your Majesty should know it."

"Ah, M. d'Artagnan, so you set your king at defiance!"

"Sire — "

"M. d'Artagnan, I warn you that you are abusing my patience."

"On the contrary, Sire."

"What do you mean by 'on the contrary'?"

"I have come to get myself arrested too."

"To get yourself arrested, — you!"

"Of course. My friend will be lonely down there; and I have come to propose to your Majesty to permit me to bear him company. If your Majesty will but give the word, I will arrest myself; I shall not need the captain of the Guards for that, I assure you."

The king darted towards the table and seized a pen to write the order for D'Artagnan's imprisonment. "Pay attention, Monsieur, that this is forever!" cried the king, in a tone of stern menace.

"I can quite believe that," returned the musketeer; "for when you have once done such an act as that, you will never be able to look me in the face again."

The king dashed down his pen violently. "Leave the room, Monsieur!" he said.

"Oh, not so, Sire, if it please your Majesty!"

"How, not so?"

"Sire, I came to speak temperately to your Majesty. Your Majesty got into a passion with me: that is a misfortune; but I shall not the less on that account say what I had to say to you."

"Your resignation, Monsieur, — your resignation!" cried the king.

"Sire, you know whether I care about my resignation or not, since at Blois, on the day when you refused King Charles the million which my friend the Comte de la Fère gave him, I tendered my resignation to your Majesty."

"Very well, then, do it at once!"

"No, Sire; for there is no question of my resignation at the present moment. Your Majesty took up your pen just now to send me to the Bastille, — why should you change your intention?"

"D'Artagnan! Gascon that you are! who is the king, allow me to ask, — you or myself?"

"You, Sire, unfortunately."

"What do you mean by 'unfortunately'?"

"Yes, Sire; for if it were I —"

"If it were you, you would approve of M. d'Artagnan's rebellious conduct, I suppose?"

"Certainly."

"Really?" said the king, shrugging his shoulders.

"And I should tell my captain of the Musketeers," continued D'Artagnan, — "I should tell him, looking at him all the while with human eyes and not with eyes like coals

of fire, 'M. d'Artagnan, I have forgotten that I am king; I have descended from my throne to insult a gentleman.'"

"Monsieur!" cried the king, "do you think you can excuse your friend by exceeding him in insolence?"

"Oh, Sire! I shall go much further than he did," said D'Artagnan; "and it will be your own fault. I shall tell you what he, a man full of delicacy, did not tell you; I shall say: 'Sire, you sacrificed his son, and he defended his son; you sacrificed him; he addressed you in the name of honor, of religion, of virtue, — you repulsed, pursued, imprisoned him.' I shall be harder than he was, for I shall say to you: 'Sire, choose! Do you wish to have friends or lackeys, soldiers or slaves, great men or puppets? Do you wish men to serve you or to crouch before you? Do you wish men to love you or to fear you? If you prefer baseness, intrigue, cowardice, — oh! say it, Sire! We will leave you, — we who are the only surviving illustrations, nay, I will say more, the only models of the valor of former times; we who have done our duty, and have exceeded, perhaps, in courage and in merit the men already great for posterity. Choose, Sire, and without delay! Whatever remains to you of the grand nobility, guard it with a jealous eye; of courtiers you will always have enough. Delay not — and send me to the Bastille with my friend; for if you have not known how to listen to the Comte de la Fère, that is to say, to the most sweet and noble voice of honor; if you do not know how to listen to D'Artagnan, that is to say, to the most candid and rough voice of sincerity, — you are a bad king, and to-morrow will be a poor king. Now, bad kings are hated; poor kings are driven away.' That is what I had to say to you, Sire; you are wrong to have driven me to it."

The king threw himself back in his chair, cold and

livid. Had a thunderbolt fallen at his feet, he could not have been more astonished; he appeared as if his respiration had ceased, and as if he were at the point of death. That rough voice of sincerity, as D'Artagnan had called it, had pierced through his heart like a sword-blade.

D'Artagnan had said all that he had to say. Comprehending the king's anger, he drew his sword, and approaching Louis XIV. respectfully, placed it on the table. But the king, with a furious gesture, thrust aside the sword, which fell on the ground and rolled to D'Artagnan's feet. Notwithstanding his mastery over himself, D'Artagnan too, in his turn, became pale and trembled with indignation. "A king," he said, "may disgrace a soldier, — he may exile him, and may even condemn him to death; but were he a hundred times a king, he has no right to insult him by casting dishonor on his sword! Sire, a king of France has never repulsed with contempt the sword of a man such as I am! Stained with disgrace as this sword now is, it has henceforth no other sheath than either your heart or my own. I choose my own, Sire; give thanks for it to God, and my patience." Then snatching up his sword, he cried, "My blood be upon your head!" and with a rapid gesture he placed the hilt upon the floor and directed the point of the blade towards his breast. The king, however, with a movement still more rapid than that of D'Artagnan, threw his right arm round the musketeer's neck, and with his left hand seized hold of the blade by the middle, and returned it silently to the scabbard. D'Artagnan, upright, pale, and still trembling, suffered the king to do all, without aiding him, to the very end. Then Louis, overcome, returned to the table, took a pen, wrote a few lines, signed them, and offered the paper to D'Artagnan.

"What is this paper, Sire?" inquired the captain.

"An order for M. d'Artagnan to set the Comte de la Fère at liberty immediately."

D'Artagnan seized the king's hand and kissed it; he then folded the order, placed it in his belt, and quitted the room. Neither the king nor the captain spoke a word.

"Oh, human heart, director of kings!" murmured Louis, when alone; "when shall I learn to read in your recesses, as in the leaves of a book? No, I am not a bad king, nor am I a poor king; but I am still a child."